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THE MAKING AND MEANING OF THE BIBLE

THE MAKING AND MEANING OF THE BIBLE

BY

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TO THE MEMBERS AND FRIENDS
OF THE GROSVENOR SQUARE FELLOWSHIP
WHO FIRST KINDLY INSPIRED THE PRE-
PARATION OF THESE LECTURES AND THEN
PATIENTLY ENDURED THEIR DELIVERY

PREFACE

THE Lectures here collected together were delivered at different times to gatherings of people, mostly young, who wanted to know something about "the modern view of the Bible." In preparing them for publication, I have retained the lecture style, although it may be more suited to the class room than to the dignity of print. Obviously, they make no pretence to scholarship. They are simply an attempt to present the results of modern Biblical study to those who are not accustomed to reading theological books. I apologise for the fact that definite and apparently dogmatic statements will be found in many places where a less confident tone would better suit the difficulties of the subject. Probably an elementary textbook on a large and complex subject is almost bound to suffer from this defect. I can only hope that the omission, in the interests of clearness, of certain reservations and qualifications has not meant the sacrifice of any real truth. I have not attempted to solve any of the problems of

Biblical study. I have only tried to present a broad general point of view, which I believe remains substantially true, even if certain details are doubtful. So short a book on so large a subject is necessarily one-sided in places.

Perhaps this book, with all its crudities, may encourage some readers to pursue further a fascinating study. For those who may care to do so, I append a list of books likely to prove helpful.

I am much indebted to my friend Mr W. Boyd Henderson for his kindness in reading the proofs. Where everything is borrowed, it would be impossible to attempt detailed acknowledgement of indebtedness to different writers and teachers, whose work has helped me to such truth as this book contains.

G. B.

Easter 1923.

NOTE.

The Scripture quotations are taken from the Revised Version.

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THE MAKING AND MEANING OF THE BIBLE

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT?

OBVIOUSLY we are a good deal perplexed to-day about the use of the Old Testament. To many thoughtful people it has become more of a hindrance than a help to faith. It appears to offer weapons to those who want to attack Christianity, and it seems to put needless difficulties in the way of those who want to believe in Jesus.

We all know that there was a long day in the history of the Church when the Old Testament was regarded as being all literally inspired, in such a way as to guarantee the accuracy of its every statement, and in such a way as to make every part of it equally valuable to the man who wanted to find out the truth about God. Nothing in it was to be questioned. We might turn up any page of it, and find there eternal truths, binding upon the minds and consciences of men.

That day has come to an end. In the last

hundred years there has been a complete revolution in our way of looking at the Old Testament. There are still some people who stand to the old view, but everyone has heard at least vague rumours about what is called by the unhappy name of Higher Criticism. Most people, who have not had the opportunity of studying the subject, have heard these rumours in an exaggerated form. You will sometimes hear it said, even now, that Criticism has abolished all the value and all the truth of the Bible. So that, between the man who says you must believe everything in the Bible, and the man who says you can't believe anything in the Bible, the plain reader does not quite know where he is.

What has happened is that we have cast off the old view of exact verbal inspiration and authority. We are now trying to approach the documents of the Old Testament without any theory of what inspiration ought to mean. We are trying to use towards them the same freedom of discussion and question as we should use towards any other documents from the ancient world. By means of this free approach we are discovering what inspiration really does mean, and wherein is the real value of the Old Testament for the religious life of our day.

It is clear that what we are dealing with in the Old Testament is not so much a book, as a collection of books, or perhaps rather a collection of booklets. The Old Testament is a varied selection from the literature of a nation. Scores of different hands have had a part in the writing of it. It is the work of speakers and reporters, writers and editors. The actual writing covers a period of well on to a thousand years. Certain small parts of it may well have been written down nearly a thousand years before Christ. Some parts of it were probably not written till about the second century B.C. It is a very varied selection of literature. Legend and myth, epic and drama, history, essay, and sermon, all have their place in it. But what gives a real unity to this varied collection is that it all deals with one subject, Israel and God. It is the literature of a nation's experience of God.

That word experience is one of the key words of the modern attitude to the Old Testament. It suggests to us the human element in the creation of the literature. We read these old writings with a new meaning when we see that they record for us the heroic spiritual leaders of Israel slowly spelling out their thoughts of God from their national experiences. The great things which the Old Testament declares

to us about God were not written in letters of fire across the sky for all to read. They were not mysterious revelations dictated to men who wrote them down without thinking. They were hammered out from experience, sometimes from gracious and kindly experience, but sometimes from experience that was hard and bitter. When a prophet declares to his hearers, "Thus saith the Lord," we are not to understand that he heard just such an outward voice as we too should have heard had we been there. His message was realised in his own inmost heart, as he prayed and pondered over the things of God.

If the truth of God was worked out by the teachers of Israel as a result of their experience, it follows that there was room for mistakes. Sometimes the leaders of the nation read their experience wrongly, and sometimes they argued from an experience which was not sufficient. To take one very obvious example, a good many of them came too easily to the conclusion that goodness and wickedness would always have their appropriate rewards in this world. This belief crops up again and again in parts of the Old Testament. "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread" (Psalm xxxvii. 25). Clearly this

faith will not square with the facts of life as we know them. Later writers in the Old Testament felt that. The Book of Job was written by a man who knew that the facts of life did not justify such a faith. And the unknown writer of the second part of Isaiah saw that suffering was something far deeper than just a punishment from God, and was often the lot of God's most devoted servants.

Again, if experience is the way in which Israel discovered much of the truth about God, it follows that her knowledge of God grew very gradually. The undying interest of the Old Testament is that it is the story of how God took a company of slaves out of Egypt, slaves with no education except a few splendid traditions, and then, through many experiences and many centuries, trained them until they became the spiritual leaders of mankind. This growth in knowledge was slow, as we should naturally expect. When we realise this, many of what are called the moral difficulties of the Old Testament cease to cause any perplexity. We know that such things as slavery and the persecution of witches have been justified from isolated words of the Old Testament (Gen. ix. 25; Exod. xxii. 18). This could never have happened if men had realised that much of the morality of the

Old Testament was a stage to be outgrown, a stage which was outgrown in later generations. Many of the cursing Psalms, and somepassages of hate in the Prophets, represent a stage of thought about enemies which was partly outgrown later by the help of such books as Ruth and Jonah. The places where God is represented as acting in ways which we feel to be unworthy of Him are often places where men have read back their own faulty motives into their thoughts of God. If we are to keep any kind of honesty in our thinking, we simply cannot believe that God ever acted in a way that was unworthy. It cannot be true that the Lord put a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets (1 Kings xxii. 23; 2 Chron. xviii. 22). We cannot believe that God called David to number the people, and then punished him for so doing (2 Sam. xxiv.). We see now that such ideas arise from an inadequate conception of God, a conception which was later outgrown by the best minds of the nation.

That is to say, God's revelation of Himself to His people was a gradual process, because in the nature of the case it had to be. By painful steps and slow, under the guidance of God, but still by the exercise of their own faculties, the people grew to a fuller and nobler

idea of the God Whom they worshipped. Happily they have left for us records of the steps they took; not in order that these stages in the way should be for ever binding upon later generations, but just that we might learn how the false ideas gave place to the true, and might measure how great was the progress made.

All this means that we must be very careful not to allow Old Testament ideas of God to dominate our Christian thinking. The Church has not always been careful enough of this in the past. It is probably true, as Mr Studdert Kennedy says, that many of our difficulties about the Atonement are due to our trying to keep the God of the Old Testament in our minds as well as the God revealed by Jesus. There is a remark in Dr Gray's book, "The Christian Adventure," to the effect that "most of us in our secret hearts grew up disliking God." Alongside of that you can put the well-known and oft-quoted remark of the little girl who said that she loved Jesus but she didn't like God. Whatever experiences lie behind these sayings are most probably due to the influence of Old Testament ideas of God, due to the fact that we have not yet fully realised how much of the Old Testament is meant to be outgrown.

What then are the chief lessons which national and personal experience helped the nation of Israel to learn? As we study the history of this little people who were the world's pioneers in the knowledge of God, I think we can distinguish four main things which they learned.

I. The Reality of God

The earliest experiences of the nation taught them that their God was a very real God, Who, to put it crudely, could do things in the world. We can hardly exaggerate the importance for this faith of the events of the Exodus. There the people saw that God did for them things that they could never have done for themselves. A company of slaves, they won their liberty from the harsh tyranny of their Egyptian masters. In a marvellous way they were brought across the Red Sea while their pursuers were drowned. They were sustained in the desert by a supply of food the like of which they had never seen before. These were things they could not forget. Ever afterwards it was clear to the best of their leaders that God was a God who was very real, and Who could be counted on. Experience taught the people of Israel that their God was a real God of power.

What is generally called the anthropomorphism of the Old Testament, though it is often perplexing to us, had its value in the early days for this lesson. We know how often, both in the mythical stories with which the Bible opens, and also in the earlier of the more historical narratives, God is thought of as a kind of glorified man, Who does the kind of things that men do. He walks in the garden in the cool of the evening (Gen. iii. 8). He comes down to see the tower of Babel (Gen. xi. 5). He puts Moses in a cleft of the rock at Sinai, and covers him with His hand, so that Moses may not see the face of God; but when He has gone past, He takes away His hand, and lets Moses see His back (Exod. xxxiii. 17–23). In later days we find that God is thought of much less physically. This kind of thing is very far removed from the highest Hebrew conception of God as Spirit. But it is not so far removed from the ideas most of us had as children. And in those early days of the childhood of the nation, it was better that God should be thought of thus crudely, rather than that His reality should be lost in a kind of abstraction which a simple-minded people could not have grasped.

II. The Grace of God

The experience of the Exodus time not only taught the leaders of Israel that their God was real. Another lesson of these days was that God cared for His people. Their understanding of this came far short of the full Christian truth, but it was of real value in preparing the way for that fuller revelation. After the Exodus it was impossible to forget that God was willing to do things for Israel. Time and again in later days, when prophets and preachers wanted to recall the people to a greater devotion to God, they looked back to this outstanding illustration of God's goodness to them. The characteristic Old Testament definition of God is that He is "the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This experience, and others that came later, led up to the teaching of Hosea and the author of Deuteronomy, that God loved His people Israel. For the most part this conviction was held in the form of a belief that God was much more interested in the people of Israel than in the other nations of the world. Later there were great souls, like the writer of Jonah, who saw that God also loved other nations. The belief that God cared for Israel also led in time to the teaching of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, that God was concerned

with individual men as well as with the nation, that religion was a personal matter, an individual relation with God. Thus the way was prepared for the fuller truth that came to men with Jesus Christ.

III. The One Universal God

It is an interesting study to trace out the way in which the Jewish people slowly came to the belief that the God Whom they worshipped was the one, the only God, of the whole world. To us this is a matter of course. It takes imagination to realise that it was not always so. The Jews were, so far as we know, the first people in the world to reach this belief which is the foundation of all our religious thinking, and from the Jews there sprang the only other monotheistic religions of the world, Christianity and Mohammedanism. The Old Testament traces the story of how the Jews became monotheists. The ancient world believed in a multiplicity of gods, as some of the modern world still does. The ancestors of the Jews shared this common view. Joshua, in a speech to the people, says, "your fathers . . . served other gods" (Joshua xxiv. 2). When Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt he taught them to think of Jehovah as God of Israel.

At this stage neither he nor the people believed that Jehovah was equally the God of every other nation. They recognised the existence of other gods, but they believed that their duty was to give heed only to Jehovah, Who was to be the only God for them. This stage in the belief of the people lasted a long time. Frequently in the Old Testament we find that the people were inclined to go after other gods as well as Jehovah, while their leaders implored them to be faithful to Jehovah alone. Elijah is memorable for his insistence that the people should make up their minds once for all, and should not try to worship both Jehovah and Baal. "How long halt ye between two opinions? If Jehovah be God, follow Him—but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings xviii. 21). Occasionally the prophets used a very daring figure, and spoke of Jehovah as married to Israel. When Israel was inclined to slip back and serve other gods, they frankly called that adultery (Hos. iv. 15), and said that Jehovah was a jealous God (Deut. vi. 15).

That was a necessary stage in the growth of the true idea, and the nation afterwards outgrew it. Many later parts of the Old Testament are written by men who have reached the truth that there is but one God in and for the whole world. Lagging painfully behind their leaders

the people gradually came to the point when they could say, with full meaning, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. vi. 4). Soon after the nation reached that stage, the fullness of time was come, and the one God sent His Son into the world to reveal to men what He was really like.

IV. The Holiness of God

If the Hebrews were the leaders of the world in the belief that there is but one true God, they were also the leaders of the world in reaching the truth that God was righteous and demanded righteousness in His worshippers. The greatness of Moses is nowhere clearer than just here. As far as we know, he was the first religious leader of men who insisted that God must be served in righteous conduct and character. We take it for granted that the religious man must be a good man. But it has not always been so, and in parts of the world it is not so to-day. Probably the greatest fault of the non-Christian world, both ancient and modern, is that religion and morality are often kept separate. The Ten Commandments began the process by which Israel was to learn that God is served only by righteous conduct. A

great deal of misery and confusion was caused in later days because the people did not more fully learn that lesson. Both Amos and Isaiah had to insist very constantly that the true service of God was in character rather than in ritual observances. Even up to the time of John the Baptist and Jesus the same truth had to be emphasised. He who would walk with God must be pure in heart. There were always people in Israel who did not learn this lesson, but the leaders learned it well, and in so doing they were pioneers. The close connection between faith and conduct is one of the real treasures of the Old Testament.

The long sections of the Old Testament which detail elaborate laws of sacrifice seem rather dull to us, but they are worth noticing in this connection. They did help to impress upon the people the fact that sin is something which God takes very seriously, and which man must take seriously too.

This has been a very rapid and inadequate summary of certain main lines of thought in the Old Testament. I have suggested something of the way in which experience and thought brought the leaders of Israel to understand the reality of God, the grace of God, the universality of God, and the righteousness of

God. I have tried throughout to emphasise the human side of all this long process of discovery, because that emphasis gives a new interest, and even a new meaning, to the literature of the Hebrew people. I cannot close, however, without expressing the conviction that the human side alone is not enough to account for what we have in the Old Testament story. It would seem to me impossible to believe that a nation, whose existence to all intents and purposes began in slavery in Egypt, could have risen from the unpromising environment of that ancient world, and could have become, as they did, the world's pioneers and leaders in religion, unless God Himself had been behind them. There is not only experience, reflection, discovery here. These words are not big enough. There is something here which it is hard to define in exact terms, and harder still to explain, but which we can only call the revelation of the living God.

Yet when all has been said that can be said about the wonder of the Old Testament, and its permanent value for religion, it remains true that it is and must be an imperfect book, because it is a preparatory book. These four lines of thought, which are its highest levels, are preparations for the coming of the One

Who is the central Person in the New Testament. All four lines converge in Him in Whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead. He that hath not seen Him, hath not yet seen the Father.

CHAPTER II

HOW OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY WAS WRITTEN

THE purpose of the Bible is to convey a religious message. It is not meant to be a textbook of science, nor yet a textbook of history. It is not even meant to be a textbook of theology. That is to say, it is not a collection of texts, any one of which may be quoted in order to establish certain doctrines about God and man. Its purpose is religious. The real reason why Christian people have always loved the Bible, whatever their theories about it, is that the Bible has helped them to know God. By this book their consciences have been touched. In reading this book their spiritual life has been nourished. It stands out high above all the other literature of the world for this reason, that no other book has so continuously led men to God.

Part of the religious message of the Bible is conveyed to us through Old Testament history. The first half of our Old Testament, from Genesis to Esther, is something like a history

of the Hebrew people, from their earliest beginnings in the mists of antiquity to the time when they were re-constructing their national life in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. After that we get a series of poetical books, and then finally, the section which is made up of the writings and preachings of the prophets. It is with the first of these three sections that this lecture deals. How, and why, was this history written ?

The first thing to be said about these books is that they are not really history in our sense of the word. They are not a careful and exact account of the rise and development of the Hebrew people. Nor is it possible to write from them an exact history of the nation. It is difficult to gather from them almost any actual dates. The greatest event in Israel's history was the Exodus from Egypt, and we do not know when that took place. (The dates that are given sometimes at the top of the margin in our Bibles are impossible, and do not come into the text of the books at all, but were added later.) Also, some of the greatest kings, such as Omri and Jeroboam II. in Israel, and Uzziah in Judah, are dismissed in a verse or two, while longer accounts are given of the reigns of men who are of much less consequence to a historian. The writers

of these books were not giving us history as we understand it at all.

Further, if we look to these books for an exact account even of the events which are described, we shall often find that we are landed in considerable difficulties. Most of us have heard it said that because the Bible is inspired of God, therefore it is in some way irreverent to question any statement which is found in its pages. Now, I am quite sure that these writings are inspired of God, but I am also quite sure that they are not in every case and in every place accurate history. There is no use burdening our minds with a theory of what inspiration means if it simply does not fit the facts as we find them. Look for a little at what we find in these books.

In the Book of Genesis we are told that God appeared to Abraham and said to him, "I am Jehovah" (xv. 7). Later on, in the Book of Exodus (vi. 3), we are told that God said to Moses that He was Jehovah, but that He was not known to Abraham by that name. It is quite clear that both these statements cannot be true. All I have to say about them at the moment is that they were written by different writers, but that it is as clear as possible that one of these writers was wrong.

There are two accounts given to us in the

Old Testament of how David took a census of his kingdom, and was severely punished by God for doing so. It is instructive to set these two accounts side by side and compare them (2 Sam. xxiv. and 1 Chron. xxi.). They are summarised in Table A (p. 43). Clearly we have two stories of the same incident, and the two stories differ considerably in detail. They also differ in one very important point, as the one tells us that God ordered David to number the people, while the other says that the command came from Satan. These two stories come from two different books of the Old Testament, and were obviously written by different people, one at least of whom must have been wrong.

When we read the story of Noah and the Flood, we cannot help noticing that some things are told twice over, and that, in one case at least, there is confusion about details. The explanation is simple enough when once we have the key to it. Here again we are dealing with two different stories, but this time they are not in different books, but are actually mixed up together in the same passage. The two stories are summarised in Table B (p. 44). Once the two stories have been separated, it becomes clear that they are really two different accounts of the same

thing. The writer, or editor, of our Book of Genesis has had before him two different stories of the Flood, and he has put them both in his narrative. In exactly the same way we have two different accounts of the Creation (Gen. i. 1—ii. 3, and Gen. ii. 4–25). In one story man and woman are created last of all, after vegetation and animals. In the other case, man is created before the animals, and woman after the animals. The writer has not attempted to decide which of the two was nearer the truth. He has simply included both.

These examples help us to see what our history is. It is not an exact and careful account of the past; it is not a book whose every statement may be taken as literally correct. It is, at any rate, a sort of history made up of different stories from different writers; it is an account put together from different sources. It begins to look as if the people who wrote the historical books of the Old Testament had before them a number of stories from the past, and selected them just as suited their purpose.

We can study this process a little more fully in the first five books of the Old Testament. These books are commonly called the Pentateuch (from a Greek word meaning a

book with five parts). This book with five parts contains the story of the Hebrew people from their earliest beginnings down to the time when they were just ready to cross over into the Promised Land and settle down in Canaan. For hundreds of years it was generally believed that this story was written by Moses. In the time of Jesus most Jews certainly believed that, and the belief lasted in the Christian Church down to about a hundred years ago. It can now be taken as absolutely certain that this is not the case. Moses was dead and buried long before our Pentateuch stories were written down in their present form.

The people who wrote the first five books of the Bible, in the form in which we now have them, were writing from a considerable collection of stories which had come down to them from earlier days. Probably there is the work of at least two dozen hands in these five books. There is in them a good deal of poetry. The earliest writings of most nations are in poetry. The first kind of literature that a nation produces is often what we call ballads, poetic accounts of early incidents in their history, poetry recited from one generation to another, until some one ultimately writes it down. Some of this sort of poetry is included in our five books (*e.g.* Exod. xv. 21; Num. xxi. 17, 18;

Num. xxi. 27–30). There are also in these books many stories written by different hands about the great heroes of the people, the men like Abraham and Joseph and Moses. When we read through these five books we find something like this. After a general introduction containing stories about the very beginnings of things, we come on to the origins of the Hebrew people, who were descended from Abraham. We come down through Isaac and Jacob, and see how the children of Jacob came into Egypt. Then we get a series of stories about how Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and brought them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Then we come to the Ten Commandments. All this part is vivid and interesting. Genesis and the first part of Exodus contain some of the most familiar of the Old Testament stories, stories which have charmed both children and older people ever since they were first told.

After that we come into a long section which is, quite frankly, much duller. The second half of Exodus, the whole of Leviticus, and part of Numbers, bring us into quite a different atmosphere. No general reader knows this section nearly so well as the previous one. There are ten times as many "good stories" in Genesis as there are in Leviticus.

In this section we find long and detailed accounts of the Jewish Law, full of all manner of complicated instructions as to how the people are to live and worship. We are told about the exact size of the Tabernacle in which worship was to take place, and so on. Such details are really not of much interest to us. Then in the second part of Numbers we get back again to the former type of history, and we watch the movements of the people up to the time when they were about to enter into the Promised Land. Any reader can see all this for himself. The history of the early days of the Hebrew people is interrupted by a very long and detailed account of law and ritual and worship.

Then we come to the Book of Deuteronomy. The history in this book is largely made up of speeches or sermons which are said to have been delivered by Moses. The writer has chosen to give us his history in the form of speeches, and has called them, for various reasons, speeches of Moses. This seems strange to us, but it would not seem at all unusual to the ancient world, which had literary customs very different from ours. When we look at the history in these speeches we find that it covers much the same period as that which we have just gone over. Once again we hear

of the crossing of the Red Sea, and the Ten Commandments, the lesser details of the law, and so forth.

An imaginary comparison may illustrate the kind of thing that meets the reader of the Pentateuch. Suppose we got into our hands a history of the late war, written in the same way as this Pentateuch, here is something like what it would be. First you would get a very vivid account of some of the earlier battles, with full descriptions of French and Jellicoe, and interesting details of the way in which our soldiers and sailors fought. Then, by the time the history had reached about the middle of the war, it would be interrupted by a long and rather dry account of what the British Army was, how it contained so many regiments of Infantry and so many of Cavalry, and so many units of Artillery and Engineers, and the rest. This section would contain lists of names of men and of regiments, and long extracts from the "King's Regulations," and would be of little interest to anyone outside the War Office. After that the stories of fighting would begin again, and would run on till the Armistice. Then we should get, as the last section of our book, a much shorter account of the war, written in very eloquent language, dealing with some of the underlying issues,

and containing also some stories of the fighting and some lists of regiments. It is in a form something like that that we get the history of the early years of the Hebrew people.

These then are the facts with which we have to deal. We have noticed the rather strange arrangement in which the history is set before us, and we have noticed that it is made up of different stories by different writers, stories which sometimes don't quite agree. Scholars have gone into every detail of this with the greatest possible care, and it is now generally believed that there are, in the five books before us, three main sets of writings. First, there is what is called a Prophetic History, which was written, probably, some seven or eight hundred years before Christ, and which was based on earlier stories, ballads and traditions. This Prophetic History contains one of the stories of the Creation and one of the stories of the Flood, and many of the most familiar stories of the leading men of those early days. It contains only very little about the Jewish Law and its details. Then there is what is called the Priestly History, which was written in Babylon, during the Exile, some five hundred years before Christ. This contains the other story of the Creation, the other

story of the Flood, a small outline of general history, and a very full account of Jewish Law and worship. The third set of writings is roughly what we have in our Book of Deuteronomy. This was written, probably a little later than the Prophetic History, about seven hundred years before Christ. The greater part of Deuteronomy consists of the book which was discovered by Hilkiah the priest in the Temple at Jerusalem in 621 B.C. (2 Kings xxii. 8).

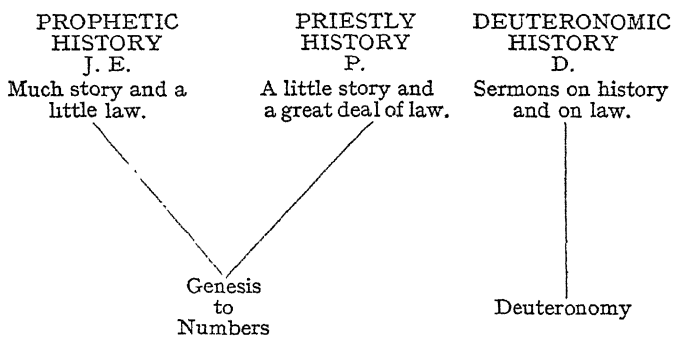
Of these three sets of writings we already know the Book of Deuteronomy. As we have it in our Bibles it is an enlarged edition of the book discovered in the Temple. The Prophetic History is, speaking very roughly, the one that contains what we regard as the best and most vivid parts of our early history. It gets its name because it is written generally from the point of view of the prophets. The Priestly History was written by a man who was very much concerned with law and worship and ritual, and wrote his history from that point of view. We should not go very far wrong if we said that his writing contained the dullest parts of our first five books, the lists of names, and the detailed regulations about worship, and so on. Most probably it was this Priestly History which was read by

Ezra to the people in Jerusalem after the return from Exile (Neh. viii.) (See Note I.)

Some time about the fourth century before Christ, the books that we know and read were written down. From out of the three sets of writings which I have described, some editors set out to make a book. They had before them the Prophetic History, the Deuteronomic History, and the Priestly History. It seems that they left the Deuteronomic History very much as it stood, and simply put it at the end of their book. For the rest of their book they made a combination of the other two. They wrote down bits out of one and bits out of the other, as they thought best. Sometimes they found two accounts of the same incident, and wrote them both down, even though they disagreed. Sometimes, probably, they found two accounts of the same event and chose only one. When they wanted to use both stories of the same event, sometimes they put in first the one and then the other, as in the case of the Creation, and sometimes they combined the two together, as in the case of the Flood. If you can imagine a man sitting down to make one connected story out of our first three Gospels, you will see what these editors had to do. The result is that the first four books of our Bible contain

material from two different histories, and so we find a good deal of repetition and some contradictions. And when the third history is added we find still more repetition, and more contradiction.

A diagram may help to make this clear.



Further detailed study would show that Prophetic History is itself a combination of two earlier ones. It would take too long to follow this out. What has been said describes, roughly, the way in which the Pentateuch was built up. And, though there is no need to go into it in detail, something very much the same could be said of the later historical books in our Old Testament. Enough has been said to give a general answer to the question, How was Old Testament History written?

What does it all mean for the ordinary

reader? It means that we cannot find in the Bible an exact and correct account of past events. We are not dealing with one story but with many, and different writers describe the same event in different ways. Also, it is important to note that much of the history was not written until many hundreds of years after the event took place. This must never be forgotten when considering the accuracy of a great deal of Old Testament history. We know how easily mistakes would occur in that time. On the other hand, we need not be perplexed by contradictions in the story. When two parts of the Bible tell us two contradictory things, we are pretty safe to assume that they came from different writers. The different writers had different points of view.

A comparison of the accounts given of the same event by two different newspapers will very often show how easily contradictions creep in, even when the event is described by eye-witnesses. How much more when the event is being described after the lapse of many years. Such contradictions as we find are only what we might naturally have expected.

If we cannot get an exact account of the details of what happened in the past, what

can we get? The question recalls us to the purpose of our writings. It cannot be too clearly stated that the purpose of the Bible is not history but religion. Such history as we do get is not to be thought of as of little consequence. Even with all allowances for contradictions and mistakes, we can still get a good general idea of the main outlines of Hebrew history. Yet it is true that our writers were not trying to write what we call history. They were writing the story of God's dealings with Israel, the story of Israel's experience of God. They passed over with a very few words important reigns like those of Omri and Uzziah, because, though these reigns were politically important, they did not seem to have any special religious lesson. They wrote much longer accounts of other kings, whose reigns were politically less significant, because the reigns of these kings seemed to have something to teach about the ways of God. The writers of the Books of Kings state, almost in so many words, that they are not writing history. Repeatedly after some account has been given of the reign of a king, we meet this sentence. "Now the rest of the acts of (the king), and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the Kings of Israel," or of Judah, as the case may be. It looks as

if the writers wanted to say to us, "This isn't the history of these reigns. This is a religious book. If you want the history of these kings you must go to the official records."

Old Testament history is history as it appears to a man of faith. It is history written to show the ways and works of God. It has been said that Alison wrote a history of Europe to prove that heaven was always on the side of the Tories. Old Testament writers wrote history to show that God was behind the Jewish nation. They were more interested in God than in kings and leaders. One sentence from the Book of Deuteronomy expresses briefly the guiding thought of Old Testament history (viii. 2). "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee." It was not written in order that the reader might pass an examination in facts and dates. It was written so that the reader might see, behind all the varied experiences of the nation, the gracious providence of the living God.

TABLE A

David's Numbering of the People

2 Samuel xxiv.	1 Chronicles xxi.
The Lord was angry with Israel. The Lord told David to go and number Israel and Judah. David told Joab to carry this out. Joab protested, but did so.	Satan told David to go and number Israel. David told Joab to carry this out. Joab protested, but did so.
After 9 months and 29 days Joab returned to Jerusalem with his report. There were 800,000 fighting men in Israel, and 500,000 in Judah.	Joab reported 1,100,000 fighting men in Israel, and 470,000 in Judah.
David repented and confessed to the Lord that he had sinned greatly in doing this.	
The Lord sent the prophet Gad to offer David three choices of punishment; a 7 years famine in the land; or 3 months' flight for David; or 3 days' pestilence in the land. On David's choice the Lord sent a pestilence.	The Lord was displeased, and sent the prophet Gad to offer David three choices of punishment; 3 years famine in the land; or 3 months flight for David, or 3 days pestilence in the land. On David's choice the Lord sent a pestilence. David repented.
David bought the threshing floor of Araunah, for 50 shekels of silver, and there built an altar, and offered sacrifice. The pestilence was stayed.	David bought a threshing floor from Ornan, for 600 shekels of gold, and there built an altar, and offered sacrifice. The pestilence was stayed.

TABLE B

The Flood Stories

Genesis vi. 5-8, vii. 1-5.	Genesis vi. 9-22.
The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and He decided to destroy man and beast. But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.	Noah was a righteous man, who had three sons God saw the corruption of the earth.
The Lord called Noah into the ark, telling him to take with him 7 of the males and 7 of the females of clean beasts, and 2, male and female, of the unclean, and 7 male and 7 female of the fowls of the air.	God said to Noah that He would destroy the life of the earth. He told Noah to build an ark God promised to spare Noah and his family, and commanded him to take into the ark with him 2 of every sort of living thing, male and female, of fowl and cattle and creeping things.
Noah did according to all that the Lord commanded.	Thus did Noah, according to all that God commanded Him.
The flood lasted about 10 weeks.	The flood lasted over a year.

Note the use of different names of God in the two stories: see p. 45.

NOTE I

Nehemiah viii. gives an account of the reading of the Law by Ezra to the people of Jerusalem. It may be that the Law which Ezra then read was the whole of the Pentateuch as we have it now. Or it may be that what he read was, as stated above, only that part of it which is known as the Priestly history. Some scholars take one view and some the other. On the whole, the probability would seem to be that it was the Priestly history. It

seems fairly certain that this Priestly history was compiled in Babylon in the later days of the Exile. As a Scribe, Ezra would probably have a good deal to do with the writing of it. And it was just what was needed to correct the abuses which he found prevalent when he returned to Jerusalem.

NOTE II

The reader is referred to general introductions to the Old Testament for further information about the different documents from which our present Pentateuch is built up. In the books on the subject the Prophetic history is usually known as J. E., the Priestly as P., and the Deuteronomic as D. The Prophetic history is compiled from two earlier documents, called J. and E. It is not as easy to separate J. from E. as it is to separate the united J. E. from P., but it can be done to some extent. One difference between them is to be seen in the names they use for God. J. from the beginning nearly always uses the national name Jehovah. His history is therefore known sometimes as the Jehovist narrative. The other, in the earlier parts of his story, generally uses for God the name Elohim. His is therefore called the Elohistic narrative. There are other differences, but this is the most striking. How long these two narratives existed separately we cannot tell.

CHAPTER III

THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF GENESIS

OUR Old Testament opens with a majestic impressiveness. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Throughout the Old Testament we study the long story of God's gradual education of the people of Israel, but before we come to this story we are met with a sort of "preface," which turns our thoughts to the very beginning of everything, and which calls us to think solemnly about God and the world, man and sin.

This preface covers roughly the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It contains familiar stories which have, unfortunately, been the cause of much perplexity to many readers of the Bible. Everyone knows something of the discussion which has raged round these stories during the last fifty years or so. They have been both ridiculed and defended by people who failed to understand their real purpose. Their unwise defenders have presented opportunities to those who wanted to attack the Bible, and have distressed many

who knew something of modern science and who still wanted to hold on to their regard for the Bible. The modern attitude of Christian scholars to these stories has brought immense relief to many a puzzled reader.

Briefly, the contents of these chapters are as follows :—

The Creation Stories.
The Fall in the Garden of Eden.
The Story of Cain and Abel.
The Generations from Adam to Noah.
The Flood Stories.
The Fall of Noah.
The Descendants of Noah.
The Story of the Tower of Babel.
The Ancestors of Abraham.

The question for this lecture is, What are these stories ? Why are they there, and what are we to make of them ? I have already said that the Bible is a religious book. Its purpose is to bring God to men and to bring men to God. It is not a textbook of history, nor yet a textbook of science. It is very important to bear this in mind while we study these stories. Obviously, at first sight, they appear to set before us an account of the very beginnings of things. They speak of the beginning of the world and of the various forms of life. They

bring before us the creation of man, and the appearance in man of what we call conscience. They tell of the beginning of sin and of its tragic consequences. They also describe something of the beginnings of the various arts and crafts of civilised life, and sketch the separation of man into the various different races known to later history. How are we to take all this ?

It is well to state quite definitely at the outset that these splendid and wonderful stories are not accurate, scientific history. That must be our starting point. We have already seen that one story tells that man was created before the animals, while another tells us that the animals were created before man. Also, that one story tells us that the Flood lasted about ten weeks, while another tells us that it lasted over a year. These examples alone are enough to show, from the Bible itself, that we ought not to look on these stories as supernaturally guaranteed and accurate accounts of what actually happened.

More than that, the evidence of modern science goes to show that the stories in the beginning of our Bible are not accurate history. When we put together all that is told us in the Old Testament, we find that the creation of the world is described as having taken place

somewhere about five thousand years before Christ. Scientists have shown us without any real possibility of mistake that man is far older than that, and that the beginnings of things run away back into untold millions of years. The order of events differs in the two stories of the Creation, but neither of them corresponds with the order in which geologists and others tell us that things actually appeared. The story of the Flood is quite impossible in many of its details. No one could put into any ark of any size two specimens of every kind of animal in the world, and, even if you could gather such a number of animals into one place, no one could prevent them from devouring one another as they do in their natural state. These examples are sufficient for our purpose. It is necessary to be quite frank about the conclusion to which we are driven. Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel are not historical persons who lived the kind of life described in the Bible. There was no actual man called Noah from whom the whole human race took its rise a second time. The Garden of Eden is not to be located in any actual part of the world, Mesopotamia or elsewhere, and there never was, sitting at its gates, an angel with a flaming sword. Cain was not an actual man who married a wife at a time when there

were no other women on earth except his mother, nor was he an actual man who was afraid of being murdered at a time when the only other man on earth was his father. There never was a serpent who spoke to a woman in words of human speech.

I have put this forcibly. It may sound strange to some when it is put like this, but it is necessary to be clear about that before we go on to consider what these stories are. These people about whom we read in the early chapters of Genesis are not people who ever had any real existence. They are not even legendary figures. A legendary figure is a man or woman who once actually lived, and around whom there have grown up legends which are not strictly true, such as Abraham or King Arthur. These people in the beginning of our Bible are purely mythical people. What a myth is we shall see later.

For the sake of illustration, let us look at the story of the Garden of Eden. This story first grew up among men and women who had no scientific education, and who did not know the real explanation of many of the facts of life. Look at some of the things which evidently struck these early observers. There is the distinction between the sexes. There is the fact, which was universal in their old

world, that woman was subject to man. There is the fact that the bearing of children involves pain. There is the fact that the serpent, unlike most other land animals, has no legs, but crawls along the ground. There is the fact that man has often felt a kind of antipathy to the serpent which he does not feel towards many other animals. Our early observers did not know the true explanation of these things, but they couldn't help wondering about them. Their wonder grew into something like our story of Eden, which at least offers some kind of explanation of the things that they had noticed.

Later stories tell us about someone who was the first keeper of sheep, and someone who was the first tiller of the ground, and someone who was the first builder of a city. They tell us of the first man to live in a tent and have cattle, the first metal worker, the first musician, and so on. The story of the Tower of Babel, which is the last in this group, tells of how men were divided into separate nations, with different languages. The first of them all tells of the creation of light and darkness, earth and water, vegetable and animal life, man and woman. We have before us here a group of stories which tell of the beginnings of various things, and of the origin of various

customs. We have story answers to questions which wondering people asked before they had enough education to know the true answers.

These big questions about the beginnings of things are questions which men naturally want to ask, but they are questions which cannot be answered without a certain amount of historical and scientific knowledge. These stories grew up in a time when there was no such knowledge. The questions men wanted to ask had to be answered by people who did not know all the facts, and who therefore could not give the correct answers.

This has happened among nearly all races of men. Stories very like those in Genesis have been unearthed from the earliest literature of many peoples. Interesting discoveries have been made in the early Babylonian literature which have brought to light stories of the Creation and the Flood very like those which we are considering. There are similar stories in early Indian literature, and many other races have stories of a like nature or stories which serve the same sort of purpose. Such stories are commonly called folk-lore or myth.

The truth is that the beginnings of man's life on earth lie far behind all written records and all traditions. They can only be unravelled

by skilled students who can read the writing of the rocks, and can infer the truth from relics and ruins. Such skilled students did not exist when men first began to think of these things. It would appear to be the case in many, if not in all the races of mankind, that "long before man is capable of either science or history he asks himself questions to which only science or history can give the correct answers." And he not only asks these questions. Knowing no science and no history, he gives himself some sort of answer which is independent of both. The name that we give to these answers is myths. There are some people who don't like the use of the word myth in connection with the Bible, because we sometimes use it loosely to mean any kind of fiction or untruth. But the word myth really means something like what I have been describing. It is "a pre-scientific answer to a scientific question; a pre-historical answer to a historical question." Myths are the answers men gave to big questions before they had enough exact knowledge to give the right answer. (See Note, p. 59.)

This, however, is only part of the truth about these Genesis stories. They are myths, but they are far more than myths. It is that "more" that gives them their value for us.

We can, I think, safely say that if they were only myths they would never have found a place in our Bibles. We have seen that myths are unscientific answers to scientific questions and unhistorical answers to historical questions. But the Bible takes nothing directly to do with either science or history. These early stories in Genesis are myths which have been quite wonderfully adapted to religious purposes. To put it briefly, they are myths which have been turned into allegories for the purposes of religion.

I have said that this strange kind of story which we call a myth is to be found in the early literature of many races. Some of the myths which have been discovered among other peoples are in many ways a little like those which have found their place in Genesis. This is specially true of those which have been discovered in Babylon. There is a Babylonian account of the Creation, which in some points rather resembles the first chapter of Genesis. There is a Babylonian story of a Flood which is rather like our story in Genesis. There are stories told among other races which remind us in some respects of the story of the Garden of Eden. But, none of these parallel stories has anything like the same religious value as our Old Testament stories have. It would

not be wholly unfair to say that they are like our stories with the religion left out. They are simply myths and nothing more.

What can we argue from this? We cannot, of course, be certain of what happened, but we may make a pretty fair guess. From all we know of other races, and from the evidence in these chapters of Genesis, it seems pretty clear that the Hebrew people also had, in their early days, a collection of mythical stories about the beginnings of things. These stories would last a long time, and would naturally be told and re-told through many generations. Finally they fell into the hands of some great religious teachers, who wanted to impress upon their people truths about God and life and sin. These religious teachers took the old myths and gradually transformed them into religious allegories which would serve the purpose of teaching religious lessons. So, some hundreds of years before Christ, these stories grew into the form in which we now read them. We all know, from John Bunyan if from no one else, what a religious allegory is. It is a purely imaginary story which teaches religious truth. Bunyan wrote of a man who journeyed from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, and of a war for the City of Mansoul. Both these allegories describe incidents which never

happened, but both are really valuable for the teaching of religion. The writers of our Genesis stories did something like that. They, however, did not need to invent the stories which formed the framework of their allegories. They found these in the old myths of their ancestors. Using those myths, they wrote allegories which taught some part of the truth of God to the people of their time.

What I have said is not put forward as an exact account of what took place. But it is probably roughly true. We are dealing, of course, with matters about which no one can be sure.

To appreciate the skill with which our unknown writers adapted the old myths to their religious purposes, we must look again at the stories to see what is their real meaning.

Read the Creation story, with which the Bible opens. I have already said that this has nothing to do with science and history. So it would be really childish to object to it because it tells things in a way that modern science cannot confirm. Its purpose is not science but religion. It aims at showing men how God comes into everything. "In the beginning God." That is the main thing for men to know. The world and all that herein is was created by God. If we want to know

exactly how God created the world, we shall go to a scientific book. But no book of science will tell us this truth, and none will contradict it. "In the beginning God." The story then goes on to tell how man is the crown of the Creator's work, man made in the likeness of God, capable of fellowship with God, and capable of understanding God's works and ways. Surely these things are both true, and worth telling.

The story of the Garden of Eden is a splendid sermon about temptation and sin. In story form we are told that man is capable of decision between right and wrong, and that because he can make that decision, therefore he is able to sin. God has given him moral freedom and responsibility. We are warned that when man does sin he is rather apt to blame someone else, but that God will not accept that kind of excuse. We are told that sin, when it is yielded to, separates man from God.

In the story of Cain and Abel, both of whom offered sacrifices to God from the fruits of their labour, we are taught a lesson which is needed by religious people of all ages, that it is not the doing of religious duties that matters, but the spirit in which a man does them. Abel's heart was different from Cain's, and his sacrifice was accepted. The rest of

the story warns us of the evil influence of jealousy, which, if man gives rein to it, may lead to murder.

In the story of the Flood, we are told, in the same allegorical way, that God hates and punishes wickedness, but that God still cares for mankind and is willing to forgive. Noah is given to us as a standing illustration of the value that God sets on righteousness, and God's promise, given in connection with the rainbow, is a beautiful description of His care for humanity. In the story of Noah's fall after the Flood we have what must surely be one of the earliest of all temperance sermons. The fruit of the vine is a gift of God to men, but it is a shame that men should so use God's gift as to " put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains."

I need not illustrate further. We have seen enough to show us what these old stories are meant to do. As we have them now, they are packed full of real religion. The men who adapted the early myths of their race, and made them into such stories, were surely men inspired of God. What they taught was " truth embodied in a tale." Wasn't it worth doing ?

If this is the truth about these early stories in Genesis, then it is surely rather stupid to

worry about whether they are actually true to fact or not. Who ever thought of asking whether the stories of Jesus about the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are true? Who ever thought of discussing where Bunyan's City of Destruction lies, and what was the date when Christian left it? A famous mathematician who read Milton's "Paradise Lost" is said to have asked what the poem was intended to prove. There have been many people who have approached these Genesis stories in the same sort of spirit. Are these stories true? It depends on what we mean by true. They are true and they are not true. In the same way the Pilgrim's Progress and the Book of Jonah and the Parables of Jesus are both true and not true. They never happened, but they are really true. They are true to life. They do not teach the truth about science and history, but they do teach the truth about God and man, life and sin. It was for that that they were written.

NOTE

I am indebted for much of this discussion of "myths" to a Lecture entitled "Holy Scripture" in the late Principal Denney's book, "Studies in Theology."

CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE PROPHETS WERE DOING

IT is a real misfortune that the ordinary reader finds the Old Testament Prophets very difficult to understand. In the three long books which bear the names of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and in the twelve shorter books, which are grouped together under the general description of "Minor" or lesser prophets, we have what is in many ways the very heart of Old Testament religion. The three or four centuries covered by the activities of these men are the most important period in the development of Israel's religion. The Chosen People of God during that time went through great political stress and trouble, but during those strained and difficult years they learned much that was of real value about God and His ways. The best elements in the religious teaching of the Old Testament were hammered out in times of almost unrelieved national disaster. It was thanks to the leadership of the prophets that political troubles resulted in religious education. If it

was the religion of Israel that prepared the way for the coming of Christ, then we can never over-estimate what we owe to the prophets, who kept alive the faith of the nation in the days of its distress.

Yet these same prophets are exceedingly difficult to understand. The books which bear their names have come down to us in a rather chaotic state. The writings of two or three different men are sometimes gathered together under one name. The preachings of the prophets are, here and there, mixed up with the remarks of other people, remarks made in reply to what the prophets had said. And above all, unless we know a good deal about the history of the times in which the prophets lived, we are bound to find it hard to see just what they were talking about. Yet it is perhaps possible, even in one lecture, to make a few suggestions as to how we may think about these great religious pioneers.

What really were the prophets? The ordinary use of the word prophet is a little unfortunate for our purpose. In common talk we use the word as meaning someone who foretells the future. Now it is certainly true that many of the prophets did speak of the future and of what it would mean for the people of Israel, but this was not their most

important work. It was quite possible for a man to be a prophet even though he never foretold anything at all about the future. One such is the author of the Book of Jonah. It would be false to say, as a few people do sometimes say, that the prophets did not predict at all. To some extent they did foretell the future. Sometimes they told the people what would certainly happen if they continued in their evil ways, and sometimes they spoke of the wonderful future which God had in store for Israel and for the world, if only Israel would turn to Him and serve Him faithfully. But prediction was not their chief work. To regard the prophets as men who were planted down here and there in order to foretell the coming of Christ is to mistake altogether the work which these men were doing. They were preachers who were saying things for the people of their own time to hear and understand. They lived five, six, and seven hundred years before Christ, and surely the people of their time would not be much interested to hear the prediction of someone who was to come into the world some six centuries after they were all dead.

To see what the prophets were really doing, we must look at some of the things they said. Take the best known sentence from Micah,

where he is speaking of the uselessness of ritual and sacrifice, and showing the people what true religion is. "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . . He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (vi. 7, 8). Or take a familiar sentence from Hosea, expressing the same thing. "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (vi. 6). Or, listen to Isaiah. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (i. 18). These are just a few of the characteristic words of the prophets. They suggest to us that these men are religious preachers and teachers, telling their people about God and sin and true religion. Micah claims distinctly to be inspired of God for one purpose. "I truly am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord . . . to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin" (iii. 8). That is one of the great works of the prophets. They were sent by God to speak to the people about their sins. And right faithfully they did this. In fearless and outspoken language, which

made them very unpopular, they denounced the sins of their time. The oppression of the poor by the rich, the usurpations of landowners, the extravagances of wealthy women, intemperance, dishonesty in business, unchastity, and national pride, these are some of the sins which the prophets exposed with unsparing frankness. The prophets were, first of all, brave and faithful preachers to the people of their own day.

Their work as preachers also led them into other fields. The prophets were religious statesmen. They never could lose sight of the fact that God cared for the whole life of the nation, and therefore they never tried to "keep politics out of the pulpit." They believed that there was a will of God for every situation in national and international politics, and that it was their business to declare that will, no matter who might be offended. In one political crisis Isaiah warned King Ahaz against involving his country in a war which would mean ruin for the kingdom. In the reign of the next king, Hezekiah, another political crisis arose, and Isaiah stood firmly opposed to the King's plan for revolt against Assyria (vii. and xxxix.). Yet all this was not merely political; it was also religious. Isaiah acted as he did because he believed in God.

It was in God's name that he intervened. Similar examples could be given from some of the other prophets. In addition to being preachers about the ways of God with men, they also applied what they preached to the public life of their nation. One might almost say, either that they were religious statesmen, or else that they were "political parsons."

There is another point of view from which we must also look at the prophets. It is impossible to read their books without seeing how very strongly they felt that they were men chosen and called of God to proclaim to the people His word. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah give us impressive accounts of the way in which God laid His hand upon them and summoned them to the prophetic life. And the prophets as a whole are strongly moved by this feeling. We have already seen how Micah believed that he was "full of power by the Spirit of the Lord." Isaiah tells us, "I heard the voice of the Lord saying . . . Go, and tell this people" (vi. 8, 9). Jeremiah's description of his call is, "The word of the Lord came to me saying, Go, and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the Lord" (ii. 1, 2). It is the same with Amos. "The Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people" (vii. 15). That is

to say, the prophets were convinced that God had sent them to their work. That work was often very hard. On the whole they met with very little response from the people to whom they preached, and not infrequently they were persecuted. But they kept at it because they believed that God had commanded them to speak, and therefore they dare not keep silence. "The Lord God hath spoken," says Amos, "who can but prophesy?" (iii. 8). Jeremiah, who so frankly takes us into the secret places of his heart, speaks of a time when the opposition of the people had almost tempted him to give up preaching, but a strange inward compulsion drove him to go on at all costs. "And if I say, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain" (xx. 9).

The great strength of the prophets comes from this inward conviction of a message and mission from God. They are sure that they stand in the inner counsels of God, and that He is ever driving them to proclaim His truth. "Thus saith the Lord" is their characteristic phrase. Because they are the servants of God, standing very near to Him,

therefore He has revealed His truth to them so that they may tell it to others. "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos iii. 7). The prophet is a man who knows that God has spoken to him, and who in turn speaks on God's behalf to others.

We do not, of course, take this to mean that God spoke in the outward ears of the prophets words which they then repeated to their hearers. The prophets were thinking their own thoughts all the time, but they stood in such a close personal relation to God, they had such a vivid sense of God's reality, that they were sure that their thoughts were being guided by Him. They were not like shorthand typists who can reproduce exactly what their employers say without putting any of their own personal thoughts into it. They were not men who could not make a mistake. When we considered Old Testament history, we learned that inspiration does not mean literal verbal accuracy about everything. The prophets were undoubtedly inspired of God. They claimed that most emphatically, and no thoughtful reader will question it. But that does not mean that they were never mistaken. Isaiah, for instance, believed that Jerusalem would never be destroyed, that God would

protect His Holy City against all enemies (xxxvii. 33–35). Micah, who lived about the same time as Isaiah, was equally sure that before long Jerusalem would be in ruins (iii. 12). This example may warn us against thinking that inspiration must mean that the prophets were invariably right in all that they said. There may be some to whom an example like this is rather puzzling. But if we remember that the function of the Bible is to bring God to men and men to God, and if we remember that the prophets were religious preachers doing exactly that work, we shall surely see that a man may be a great preacher of God's truth even if he does not know exactly what the future has in store. The prophets were inspired preachers. God was intensely real to them. They were sure of certain main leading truths about God. They thought and prayed about these truths, and then tried to look at their country and their world with the eyes of God. What they saw made them feel sure that they must speak. Through their own thoughts, and through their own words, God was able to speak to His people.

What, then, were the prophets, and what were they doing? They were passionately religious men, with a very keen personal faith in a living God. They were preachers

about God and sin and human life, preachers who felt that God had called them to preach and that they simply must obey. They were preachers who were very sure that God cared for the whole life of a nation, and they therefore sought to apply religious principles to the social and political needs of their time as well as to the lives of individuals. They were the embodied conscience of the nation, generally rather unpopular, and deeply sure that they were doing God's work.

If that is what the prophets were, the next question to be asked is, What did they teach? To attempt anything like a complete summary of the teaching of the prophets would take us much too long. But we must try to look, very briefly, at the main contributions which the leading prophets made to the religion of their time.

The earliest of the writing prophets is Amos, who lived about 750 years before Christ. Amos appears at a time when his nation has been growing very wealthy after a long reign of peace and prosperity. The reign of Jeroboam II. in Israel was something like the reign of Queen Victoria in England. After a time of military success, Israel had settled down to grow rapidly richer. Like most other nations, in its growing wealth, it had neglected

its poor. New and suddenly acquired riches had brought characteristic evils in their train. Yet, with all this, the people were still very religious, very careful about their church-going and their sacrifices. It was this combination of religion and social wrong that so angered Amos. Down from the hills of Tekoa came this shepherd prophet, who declared to the astonished people that he was sent from God to denounce their sins and to warn them of the impending doom. With passion and frankness he denounced the luxury and oppression and greed of the day. The professed religion of the people is a sham. They are worshipping God in their temples, while cruelty and immorality stalk unchecked through the land. God will assuredly punish all this. One day there will be a reckoning, and their sham worship will not save them. It is not worship but character that God wants. Sin always drags something terrible in its train. They need not boast of being the chosen people of God. God is a God of righteousness, and will assuredly punish sin.

Immediately after Amos we come to Hosea, a very different type of man. God needs all sorts to be His prophets, and uses the varying dispositions of men to express different sides of His truth. Hosea was a gentle, tender,

thoughtful preacher, who saw that Amos's message of punishment to come was not the whole truth. Hosea learned much of the truth of God where many another saint has learned it, in the school of suffering. His home life was the saddest that any man can be called on to endure. His wife was unfaithful to him, and ran away with another man. Hosea loved his wife with a deep and enduring love, which even such sin could not kill. This turned his thoughts to God. Israel as a nation had been unfaithful to God. Hosea saw the sin of Israel as clearly as Amos. But God's love was surely as strong and tender as Hosea's. It could not be broken by sin. Hosea longed for his wayward wife to return, that he might gladly forgive her. So God was longing for His unfaithful people to turn back to Him, and would delight to forgive them. Therefore Hosea cries to his people, "Come, and let us return unto the Lord" (vi. 1). God is more than just stern righteousness. He is that. But Hosea comes very near to the Christian truth that God is love.

Then comes Micah, a stern champion of the poor, who speaks in many of the accents of the Christian socialist, and declares that what God requires of His people is that they should do justice and love mercy. He speaks vigor-

ously of social injustice and the wrongs of the poor, and declares that these things have earned the punishment of God. But he also speaks of the amazing possibility of forgiveness, and of the glorious future that God has in store for His people if they will only repent. God is waiting to bring into the world the reign of universal peace. When Jerusalem has learned her hard lesson and become once again a real City of God, then the nations will come there for arbitration because they have learned that there God's law is to be found. All this may yet come to a sin-stained, undeserving people, because of the incredible wonder that there is forgiveness with God. " Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity ? " (vii. 18).

About the same time as Micah, we also have a very different kind of prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, the author of most of the first thirty-nine chapters of the book that bears his name. Isaiah was a high-born statesman, perhaps of royal blood, who not only proclaimed the truth of God, but also was in a position to use his influence to carry out God's will in politics. He felt the sin of his people very deeply, and, like Amos, he was quite sure that religion without righteousness was an offence to God. What he called, in a

biting phrase, "wickedness and worship" was something that God could not tolerate. He was sure that God would punish sin. But the purposes of God could not be defeated by the sins of men, and so, even though he believed that God would punish the nation, still he was convinced that Jerusalem would be spared, and that a small remnant of the people would repent and be faithful. Therefore those who do really follow the Lord may trust in the Lord. "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (xxx. 15).

Some six hundred years before Christ we come to Jeremiah, the most delightfully human of all the prophets. The kingdom of Judah had fallen on evil days, and a powerful enemy was at the very gates of Jerusalem. Disaster overhung the nation. In spite of this, the nation had a childish confidence that all was well because they were still worshipping God in the Temple at Jerusalem. Jeremiah tells them, like nearly all the other prophets, that it is not so much worship as right conduct that God wants. It is a religion of the heart that alone can do any real good. A religion of outward observances has no value in God's sight. With passionate feeling, Jeremiah tells the people that God's punishment for their sins is already upon them. The enemy will

conquer and God's people will be carried off into exile. Jerusalem will be destroyed, and so the people will not be able to continue their long established Temple worship. This leads him to a new step forward. True religion is not a matter of any particular place or building. It is a matter of the heart. In whatever land he has to live the individual may still have right relations to God. The exile, though a punishment of God, will be also a providence of God, for it will teach the people to be independent of the externals of worship, and to look only upon the religion which consists in a man's heart being right with God.

As a matter of fact, this is very much what the seventy years of exile in Babylon did for very many of the Jewish people. During that time Ezekiel carried some of Jeremiah's thoughts a stage further, and helped the people to see that religion was not only a national, but also a personal matter. The individual must stand on his own feet before God. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (xviii. 4). Thanks mainly to these two prophets the Exile was a time of real advance in religious thinking. But it was also a time of heart-breaking misery. The Jewish people were very home sick for their be-

loved strip of land, and were very unhappy during the time when they were prisoners of war.

When the seventy years were nearly run, a new voice was heard among God's exiled people. It was a voice of comfort and hope. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned" (Isaiah xl. 1, 2). So the second Isaiah, author of chapters xl. to lv. of the book that bears that name, tells the exiles that God has not forgotten them, and that they will soon be brought back to their own beloved land. In words of wondrous music he foretells a great and happy future for those who, by the kind mercy of the living God, will return once more to the Holy City, there to re-establish that worship of God which is one day to spread over the whole earth.

This great prophet, whose name we do not know, but whom we may conveniently call Isaiah of Babylon, then addresses himself to the most difficult problem of the time. Why has God's people suffered so? He is not completely satisfied with the explanation that it is the just punishment for sin. No doubt it is partly that, but there is more in it than that. For far too long Israel has

believed that all suffering is a punishment for sin, and that those who serve God will never suffer. That is not entirely true. Suffering, this prophet says, may be a mark of God's favour. Sometimes it is the servants of God who suffer most. Good men, who had watched the pathetic career of Jeremiah, must have begun to see something of that truth. The servants of God sometimes suffer for the sins of others. So Israel has been suffering for the sins of other nations. Purified by her suffering, she will now go back home, and lead the other nations to the knowledge of God. Israel was a nation that had been "despised and rejected of men" (liii. 3). But the day is coming when the heathen nations will learn to say of Israel, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: . . . and with his stripes we are healed" (liii. 4, 5). Therefore let the people return to Jerusalem, and enter upon this bright and glad future. "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (lv. 12).

This radiant vision of the future was not

fulfilled. The people, or many of them, returned to Jerusalem, but life there turned out to be very different from the picture drawn by the Prophet. We British people believed once that the world "after the war" was going to be very different and very much better, but we discovered later that life after the war was a good deal more troublesome than life before the war. Something like that happened to the people who returned to Jerusalem. The real contribution which this second Isaiah made to religious thought was not in his predictions, but rather in his new view of suffering. It was he who first reached the idea that good men and good nations might suffer for the sins of others, and that through their sufferings others might be led to hate their sins and turn to God. Our Lord was comforted by this thought as He faced the Cross. It is the life and death of Jesus that show us the full meaning of what this prophet was feeling after. A suffering Israel did not, in actual fact, lead the world to God, but a suffering Jesus is doing so.

This has been a very scanty and incomplete outline of the work of the prophets. A great deal has, of necessity, been left out. The Book of Jonah, the greatest of the later prophetic writings, will be discussed in a separate lecture.

But I hope that this rough sketch of what the prophets were and did may help us to a new understanding of these heroic preachers of the righteousness and mercy of the Lord. Each was, in his own way, a lonely pioneer, and suffered the lot of the pioneer in being misunderstood and persecuted. Each found some aspect of the real truth of things. None of them quite saw the whole truth as we know it now. But each of them found some truth which was long afterwards taken up and developed to its fulness in Jesus Christ. "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son" (Heb. i. 1, 2).

NOTE III

In this chapter I have said that prophecy is not primarily the foretelling of events. Something more needs to be said about the way in which some people have misused the Bible by trying to read into it detailed predictions of events in modern history. Different parts of the Bible have far too often been regarded as history written beforehand, and written in rather obscure riddles at that. Sometimes men have exercised considerable (and deplorable) ingenuity in discovering in the writings of the prophets references to quite modern events. More often their happy hunting ground has been the two Apocalyptic Books in the Bible, the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. Space does not allow of detailed considera-

tion of the meaning of these two rather difficult books. Little more can be said here than just this, that these books were written for the encouragement of those who first read them, and not to foretell in mysterious detail events which have happened or will happen in our day.

Such verses as Isaiah viii. 9, 10, and Haggai ii. 7 have been quoted as definite predictions of the days of the world war which broke out in 1914. The Books of Daniel and Revelation have been ransacked to provide similar predictions. At the time of the Reformation, some Protestants discovered that the Roman Catholic Church was the Scarlet Woman (Rev. xvii. 4, 5). Catholics replied that the mystic number of the beast, 666 (Rev. xiii. 18), stood for Martin Luther. A modern writer has discovered that the year 606 B.C. was the beginning of the "period of the Gentiles," and that the period was predicted as lasting 2520 years, which of course brings us, rather neatly, to 1914 A.D. A well-known Biblical scholar of last century fixed on the year 1836 as the year of the imprisonment of Satan, while another writer, with even more detail, deduced from somewhere in the Bible that the end of the world was to come at 3 p.m. on April 11th, 1901.

The great crises of world history seem always to offer to cranks the opportunity of searching the Scriptures for predictions, and of arguing from their predictions the probable date of the Second Coming or the end of the world. The Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and of course the recent war, have all called forth the efforts of such misguided enthusiasts. The only reason for referring to these things here is that the recent war has been responsible for a marked recrudescence of this desire to discover the secrets of the future in the pages of the Bible. The writer remembers many eager discussions with soldiers at the front on the question

of discovering the date of the end of the war in the Book of Revelation.

The one safe principle to keep in mind is that the writers of the Bible were concerned chiefly for the people of their own time. The prophets preached in order to instruct and help those who actually heard them. The writers of the Apocalyptic Books were trying to encourage people undergoing savage persecution for their faith. The Book of Daniel was written in the time when Antiochus Epiphanes was persecuting the faithful Jews in his efforts to stamp out their religion, about 160 years before the coming of Christ. The Book of Revelation was written about 250 years later, when the little Christian Church was enduring the ferocious hostility of the Roman Empire. The writers of these two books certainly expressed parts of their message in a way which we to-day find it hard to understand. But we may be sure that it was for the people of their own time that they were writing. We can hardly imagine that a Christian, going in peril of his life in A.D. 90, would be much comforted or helped by a prediction of what was going to happen in 1914 or 1925.

The Bible is not a book of history written in advance. To attempt to find from its pages the date of the end of the world or of the Second Coming, is only to be ingenious in a mistaken cause. " Of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father " (Mark xiii. 32). Those who care to read a little further about this matter will find some interesting details in Prof. A. S. Peake's book, " The Revelation of John," to which I am indebted for some of the examples given above. One or two sentences from the Introduction to that book may be quoted.

" Both prophecy and apocalyptic spring directly out of the contemporary situation, and are adjusted to it. The

prophet speaks to his own generation and is concerned with its urgent problems. . . . And similarly the apocalyptist is concerned, not with the centuries that are to follow the publication of his work, but with the need of his own time, and he too addresses his own contemporaries, speaking the fitting word to their condition" (p. 148).

CHAPTER V

THE BOOK OF JONAH

THE Book of Jonah deserves to be discussed in a separate lecture, partly because it is one of the noblest writings in our Old Testament, partly because it is so unlike the other prophetic books, and partly because it has for so long been almost entirely misunderstood. How many attacks on the veracity of the Bible have centred in this book? Even to this day I am afraid it is only known to many people as "something about a whale." Scoffers have poured scorn on the idea of believing such a silly tale, and unwise defenders have insisted on its literal accuracy, and both have completely failed to understand what the author was trying to do. The real, and beautiful, meaning of the book has too long been hidden behind the enormous bulk of the whale. Yet when we come to examine this book, we find that the whale fills only a very small place in the story. All that is said of it is said in three verses (i. 17, ii. 1, ii. 10). The real message of the book is

something entirely different from a miraculous story of how a man was swallowed by a whale, and survived, apparently none the worse of his gruesome experience.

The Book of Jonah is an allegory. Jonah himself is probably a historical character. We read in 2 Kings xiv. 25 of a prophet called Jonah, who lived in the reign of Jeroboam II. of Israel. Round this man a very much later writer has woven an allegory with a singularly deep message for the Jewish people. The book is not meant to be read as history. It is not intended to be believed as we believe the Gospel according to St Mark, or the Acts of the Apostles. It is teaching about God, and God's purposes for men, conveyed in the form of a story. It is an imaginary story like the parables of Jesus or the allegories of Bunyan. It is not meant to be believed. It is meant to be understood. People who want to jeer at the Bible tell us that it is ridiculous to believe that a man was swallowed by a whale and came out alive, or that a shrub big enough to shelter a man grew up in one night and died the next, or that a great city like Nineveh was converted in a single day. I quite agree. It is ridiculous. No one is asked to believe that these things really happened, and it is quite futile to search natural history

for the possibility of a fish whose throat is large enough to swallow a man. This is an imaginary story, put together to teach a great and much needed lesson, and it is most unfortunate that anyone ever thought it was anything else.

Before we go on to look at the teaching of this book, let me remind you, for a little, of the beliefs of the people to whom it was first written, and for whom its message was intended. There is no possibility of measuring the contribution which the Jews have made to the religion of the world. The history of the Hebrew people, and the writings of their great leaders, have been of absolutely priceless worth for the spiritual progress of mankind. Yet it has to be admitted that as a people they were often very self-centred in their religion. They were brought up to believe that they were the chosen people of God. Though this was true, the people often persisted in understanding it the wrong way. Much of the work of the prophets was a protest against the popular misunderstanding of this truth. The mass of the people were far too ready to believe that God had very little interest in other nations. Too often they believed that other nations were the enemies of God, and that was all there was to be said

about them. The Jews came to know much of the truth of God, but they were never really a missionary people, because they never believed that God cared much for other nations.

Again the nation of Israel was, during much of its history, surrounded by powerful enemies. It has sometimes been called the little Belgium of the ancient world. It had often to fight for its very existence. This quite naturally produced in Israel an intense and narrow patriotism. Kipling's phrase about "the lesser breeds without the law" expressed just what the Jews so often felt about other nations. They knew that God had been very merciful to them, but they hardly imagined that He would be, or should be, merciful to others who had been their enemies. They feared their neighbours and wanted to see them destroyed. They believed that their neighbours ought to be destroyed, and that one day God would arise in just wrath and destroy them. At the time of the Crusades, the whole of Christian Europe thought that the Moslems ought to be destroyed. Raymund Lull failed to persuade the Church of those days to send missionaries to the Moslems, because the Christians of Europe were sure that God wanted to destroy the Moslems. That is very much the way in

which the Jews were apt to think of the heathen nations round about them. Their patriotism was a strange mixture of religion, national pride, and fear.

The Book of Jonah, the greatest missionary book in the Old Testament, was written to correct this narrow pride and nationalism. The unknown writer, whose date is probably somewhere about the fourth century before Christ, had caught a wider vision of the mercy of God, and wanted to pass that on to his people. He chose to do it in the form of an allegory. In this story the prophet Jonah represents the people of Israel. That is the one thing we need to bear in mind as we turn to the story itself. Jonah stands for the nation. God's dealings with Jonah are a parable of His dealing with Israel.

The story opens by telling how Jonah got a message from God to go and warn the great heathen city of Nineveh. He was to go and tell Nineveh that her wickedness was seen of God and would lead to destruction (i. 1, 2). But Jonah was reluctant to go. He was unwilling to warn Nineveh. He was quite content that Nineveh should be destroyed, as she had so richly deserved. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which had been one of Israel's most powerful enemies in the past,

and in this allegory stands for the heathen nations which the Jews so disliked. Jonah was so unwilling to give God's warning to Nineveh that he took ship to Tarshish, which was about as far away from home as any place he could get to. Like so many of his people, he thought that the further he was from Jerusalem, the further he would be from God, and he hoped that, by crossing the sea, he would get away from the presence of the Lord (i. 3). On the sea he was caught in a great storm. During the storm we see the heathen sailors all praying to their gods, while Jonah is asleep. The heathens on that ship are religious, while the one man who ought by rights to have prayed to God, was forgetful. The heathen sailors had to beg Jonah to pray too (i. 4–6). After that, those superstitious sailors cast lots to see if they could discover whose presence was endangering the ship. When the lot fell upon Jonah, they were very unwilling to cast him overboard. Jonah's conscience was touched, and he begged them to throw him over. After which the sailors turned to the worship of the true God (i. 7–16).

Surely the meaning of the writer is clear. The story is strange enough, but we cannot miss its meaning. Jonah is the nation of

Israel refusing God's call to preach to the heathen. Israel, in her attitude to other nations, has been like a disobedient man trying to escape from the voice of God. The story of Jonah's voyage is told in such a way as to suggest that there is a soul of goodness even in the heathen. The heathen sailors are better men than Jonah. They are religious even if they know not the true God. They are kindly, even if they are heathen. And they are willing to repent and believe in God if they are given a chance.

Then we come to the story of the great fish (i. 17). The great fish is the writer's way of rescuing Jonah from the dangers of the sea into which he had been cast. It represents the trying experience of the nation during the Exile. Israel, having been disobedient to God's commands, had been swallowed up by the nation of Babylon, but had been graciously brought back from exile by the good hand of God. Probably our writer got the idea of the great fish from Jeremiah, who had already used a similar figure to describe the exile in Babylon (li. 34). "Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon hath devoured me, he hath crushed me, he hath made me an empty vessel, he hath swallowed me up like a dragon, he hath filled his maw with my delicates; he hath cast me

out." Our writer tells us that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, which had been prepared by the Lord. After being inside the fish three days and three nights he was cast up on dry land.

The second chapter of the book is taken up with Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving for his deliverance. It is largely made up of quotations from the Psalms, and in the opinion of many scholars it was not part of our original book of Jonah at all, but was added later. Certainly it does not help on the story at all. Indeed, it rather interrupts the allegory, which reads better if it is omitted altogether.

In chapter iii. the story goes on to tell how the word of the Lord comes again to Jonah. After his actual experience of heathen nations, after his discovery that the power of God extends beyond the borders of Israel, perhaps he will be more willing to go as a missionary to heathen lands. The writer wants to show that God will not turn down a man or a nation after one act of disobedience. Israel has disobeyed God but Israel is offered another chance. So the writer tells us of the second command that came to Jonah.

This time Jonah was more obedient. He went to Nineveh to preach. "Yet forty days,"

he proclaimed, "and Nineveh shall be overthrown." This was the message he was called to proclaim. At first sight it seems a harsh message. But the whole story suggests to us that we must read the message as a warning, and not as a proclamation of something that is absolutely certain to come. It is a message to say that if Nineveh persists in her sin she will certainly be destroyed. But when God sends a message like that, He sends it in the hope that those who hear it will take warning and repent. (See iii. 10.) Jonah, however, was rather inclined to take God's message as a sure and certain prediction of well-deserved doom. That was the kind of message he was willing to deliver to a heathen power. The story then goes on to tell how the wicked city of Nineveh believed God, and repented. Everyone in the city, from the king down to the very cattle, took the message to heart. The writer is again trying to persuade his readers that the heathen can be turned to God, if only someone will go and preach to them.

The last chapter tells us how Jonah was grievously distressed by this turn of events. Apparently Nineveh's repentance meant that God was going to spare the city after all. All Jonah's ideas of justice rebelled at this.

Nineveh had sinned, and deserved to be punished. And Jonah had declared its doom. That God should spare Nineveh was not at all to his mind. He went outside the city and simply sulked. He did not want Nineveh to be spared. He wanted to watch its destruction. If he wasn't to see that, he might as well die. If that was justice, then the world was no place for him (iv. 3). The writer is very delicately holding up a mirror to the conscience of Israel, showing the people that they did not really want the mercy of God to extend to other nations.

In the closing verses he suggests how God might reason with Israel. The story shows us Jonah sitting outside the city, distressed and peevish, while God gently chaffs him about his temper. The blazing eastern sun was very hot, but a great plant suddenly grew up to shelter the rebellious prophet. Jonah began to feel better. He was still angry, but he was more comfortable. He became quite fond of his welcome, shady shrub (iv. 4–6). Next day the shrub disappeared, and Jonah was more angry than ever. Again God spoke to him. "Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?" (iv. 9). Poor Jonah, are you so very angry because you have lost your shady plant? Jonah retorted that he was rightly angry, as

angry as he could be, angry "even unto death" (iv. 9). And the beautiful reply of God is the close of the book (iv. 10, 11). "And the Lord said, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

The meaning of this is quite plain. God's reply to Jonah is something like this. Poor Jonah, you are distressed at the perishing of a plant. You did not create that plant: you had no interest in it except that it served your comfort. Yet you grieve when it is destroyed. But I created Nineveh. Besides all the older people, there are in the city over a hundred thousand little children, too young to know which hand is which. I created these people. Do you think I want to see them destroyed? Have I not more reason to love Nineveh than you have to love your plant? If you are right to regret the loss of your plant, what should I feel about the loss of the great city and all its people?

It is a parable of God's reasoning with

his angry and intolerant people Israel. God created the heathen nations. He loves them because He created them. He doesn't want to destroy them. He wants to save them. There is no higher teaching than this in the Old Testament. This is the purest missionary teaching that we have before Christ's coming. God loves the whole world. He chose out Israel for the sake of the whole world. He taught Israel just that Israel might teach others. The writer is trying to break down the narrow exclusiveness of his readers. He is trying to show Israel that other nations are not enemies to be destroyed, but friends to be loved. He is trying to summon Israel to go out into all the world and preach the truth of God to every creature.

The story stops very abruptly. If it were actual history we should certainly be told how Jonah responded to the last appeal of God. But, as it is allegory, it has to stop. Because the writer does not know how his readers will take this little book which he has written. Only the coming years can show how the allegory ought to go on. Many scholars believe that this book is the last utterance of the Old Testament prophets. (The Book of Daniel, which comes later, is not really prophecy, and is not grouped with the prophets

in the Hebrew Bible.) If the book of Jonah is really the last of the prophetic writings, it is surely fitting that it should carry us so very near to the central declaration of the New Testament, that "God so loved the world."

CHAPTER VI

THE EPISTLES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

ABOUT twenty years after the death of Jesus, Paul was in Corinth. He was planting a Christian Church in one of the wickedest cities known to the ancient world, and he was finding it rather difficult. The Jews could not make anything of the idea of a crucified Messiah, and the Gentiles inclined to think the whole thing a rather foolish story (1 Cor. i. 23). Still, his work was meeting with some success, and was engaging all the energy and all the interest which he could give to it. One day, however, an interruption occurred, which called him to think for a little about the needs of another Church which he had recently founded. His two young assistants, Silas and Timothy, had come to Corinth, bringing him the latest news from the Church in Thessalonica (our Salonika). Paul was not altogether pleased with their report. In the absence of the missionary from whom these Thessalonian Christians had

first learned their faith, things were not going very well. Probably Silas and Timothy told Paul that the Christians in Thessalonica still thought all the world of their spiritual father, and that a word from him would go a long way to put things right. A personal visit to Thessalonica being out of the question at the moment, Paul hit on the plan of sending a letter. Having rather weak eyesight, Paul did little writing himself, and generally dictated his correspondence to one of his assistants, sometimes adding a line or two at the end in his own hand. So now, he sat down in Aquila's room in Corinth, and dictated, either to Silas or to Timothy, what he had to say to the Church of Thessalonica.

" Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ : Grace to you and peace " (1 Thess. i. 1). And so on. None of the three men in that tentmaker's room in Corinth that day had any idea of the historic importance of what they were doing. These words just quoted are the beginning of the earliest book in our New Testament. All unknown to himself, Paul was dictating the first words of a new Christian Bible. This is how the writing of the New Testament began. Paul's letters were written before any of our

present Gospels, and the first of our Pauline letters was the one which we call 1 Thessalonians. It is rather unfortunate that the Books of our New Testament are not printed in the order in which they were written. Even Paul's letters, which are all grouped together, are arranged more or less in the order of their length, and not in the order in which he wrote them.

A year or two later Paul was in Ephesus, carrying on his unceasing missionary work. He had stayed for a long time in Corinth, but the time had come when he felt that the Corinthian Church might learn to stand on its own feet while he pushed on to proclaim his gospel in other places. While he was in Ephesus news was brought to him of the troubles of the Corinthian Church. That young Church was surrounded by the darkest influences of paganism, and many Christians had been unable to stand up to their difficult environment. Various sins had crept into the life of the Church, and had been allowed to remain instead of being sternly dealt with at once. The Church, moreover, had been splitting up into parties and factions, some people saying that Paul was their favourite, others that they preferred Apollos, and so on. Further, someone in the Corinthian Church

had sent Paul a letter asking for his advice about many practical points of conduct and worship. What was to be done in the case of a marriage between a Christian and a heathen? How were they to celebrate the Lord's Supper? What were they to do about the eating of meat that had been offered to idols in the temples? In some ways it was rather a sad letter for a missionary to read, and the report of Paul's friends who had just come from Corinth was sadder still.

Once again a letter was called for, and Paul dictated the letter which we know as 1 Corinthians. He spoke with joy about the faith of many in Corinth, and he recalled with gratitude how many really bad men had become saints in Christ Jesus. He rebuked the Christians for the various ways in which they were bringing discredit on the faith. He gave them a great deal of practical advice about the different things mentioned in their letter to him. He gave them the fullest instructions the New Testament contains about the celebrating of the Communion. He wrote an immortal answer to their difficulties about the resurrection, telling them that they might take it as a fact that could be vouched for by hundreds of people who had seen the Risen Lord, but that they must not worry about

perplexing questions as to the kind of body which He wore. He rebuked them sternly for their party spirit, and, in the most beautiful chapter in all his writings, he told them of the more excellent way for the solving of all problems, the way of that love that seeketh not its own, but beareth, believeth, hopeth, and endureth all things, the more excellent way of love that never faileth.

These two examples, given at some length, may show us something of what Paul's letters are and how they came to be written. We are rather apt to think of them as more or less obscure theological treatises. The examples I have taken may help us to see that they are the correspondence of a busy missionary, who writes about all manner of things to the Churches in which he is interested. Some of his letters were written in answer to definite questions that were asked of him. Others were written because of reports brought to him by people who had visited his Churches. They were letters written in particular situations, with a view to helping young and struggling missionary Churches over difficulties which had arisen in his absence. The result is that they deal with an amazing variety of topics.

How to prevent the spread of party feeling

in a Church; how to celebrate the Sacrament; how to deal with a Church member who has fallen into grave immorality; whether Christians ought to go to law with one another; why you should take a collection for another Church that is in need; what is the position of women in a Church surrounded by the immoralities of a heathen community; the duty of Christian slaves and of Christian masters; these are some of the many questions discussed in Paul's letters. Many foreign missionaries would tell us that they are just the kind of questions that naturally would arise among young Churches in heathen lands.

Probably our New Testament preserves for us only a selection of all the letters which Paul wrote during his long missionary activity. It may be taken as nearly certain that he wrote one letter to the Corinthians which is now lost altogether, and we may fairly assume that he wrote many others of which we have now no trace. Most of his letters were written to Churches, and generally to Churches which he had himself founded. The one sure example of a letter of Paul to a single individual is the beautiful little letter to Philemon, whose runaway slave Onesimus had been converted during Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

The selection of Paul's letters which has

come down to us covers a period of about ten years of his life. The two letters to the Thessalonians come first, about the year 50 A.D. Later, while he is still a working missionary, he writes two letters to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, and one, the most formal of all his letters, to the Romans. Again, a few years later, when he has become a prisoner in Rome, he writes to the Philippians, the Colossians, the Ephesians, and also to Philemon. Nearly all these letters come under the general description which I have given. They are the letters of a missionary, written to meet particular situations, for the direction of different Churches.

The exhaustive and careful study of the last hundred years leaves us very nearly sure that all these letters to which I have referred are genuine letters of the Apostle Paul. A few scholars, whose opinions are of very great value, are a little doubtful about Ephesians and Colossians, for reasons which need not be discussed here; but even if these are to be regarded as a little uncertain, the rest are very generally accepted. On the other hand, when we come to the letters to Timothy and Titus, we are on much more doubtful ground. It is pretty generally agreed that these three short letters cannot have been written by Paul in

the form in which we now have them. There are many questions about them which cannot be answered in any satisfactory way, and it may be that we shall never know all we should like to know about their authorship and date. Probably the nearest we can get to the truth is to say that they contain genuine fragments of Paul's writings, but also a good deal that cannot have come from him.

That covers all Paul's letters which are preserved in the New Testament, but there is one other Epistle which must be mentioned in this connection. There has crept into our Bibles a traditional title to the Epistle to the Hebrews, associating it with Paul. I do not know how exactly that tradition arose, but from very early days men have felt pretty sure that Paul did not write it. It was not admitted into the New Testament until long after the letters of Paul, and even when it was admitted, it was not placed among the Pauline Epistles, but after them. Origen, who was the greatest Biblical scholar of the early Church, sums up the situation in a quaintly modern phrase by saying, " Who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews God only knows." Many names have been suggested as possible authors of this book, but none has met with any general acceptance. It can safely be said, however,

that its thought and language are not those of Paul.

It may be a little distressing to some to think that there are books in our New Testament which we can no longer associate with the great names that are generally connected with them. We shall see later that this is the case with the first of our Gospels, and that it may also be the case with the fourth. We have now seen that no definite author can be assigned to the Epistle to the Hebrews. If there were time to discuss in detail all the letters of the New Testament, we should also find that 2 Peter cannot be attributed to the Galilean Apostle, and that we don't know whether the Epistles of James and Jude were written by brothers of the Lord or not. We should also discover that some scholars have their doubts about 1 Peter. And, in a later chapter, we shall see that it is impossible to be sure about who wrote 1 John.

But is this, after all, a great loss? We do not read these letters simply because of the great names traditionally attached to them. The Epistle to the Hebrews, like the Book of Jonah, remains a very wonderful book, whoever wrote it. 1 John remains the most profound of all the New Testament letters, whether it was written by the Apostle or not.

I have seen somewhere an illustration which may be worth borrowing. Suppose that some day a great picture, which is at present included in a Turner collection, were proved not to have been painted by Turner at all. What then? It would not therefore become any less great as a picture. We should not feel that there was one great picture the less, but rather that there was one great artist the more. Might not something the same be said about some of these New Testament books? If the Epistle to the Hebrews was not written by Paul, then somewhere in the early days of the Church there was a "great unknown" who was capable of writing that unique Epistle. A sentence from Thomas a Kempis, who lived many centuries before the days of modern Biblical enquiry, is worth quoting here. "Let not the authority of the writer move thee, whether he be of small or great learning: but let the pure love of truth draw thee to read. Search not who said this, but mark what is said." ("The Imitation of Christ," Book I. 5).

Turn again to the question of what Paul was doing in his letters. We have seen that they are the correspondence of a busy missionary who was trying to guide young Churches through dangers and difficulties. This is true,

but it is not the whole truth. It is clear that there is more than this in Paul's letters. There is a great deal of what, for want of a better word, we must call theology. There are weighty discussions about the central things of the Christian faith, such as the resurrection of Jesus, the atonement, the incarnation, and the like. Many of these discussions are rather hard for us to follow. It is not easy to get back into the particular intellectual outlook of the times in which and for which Paul was arguing. It is difficult to understand the peculiar use which he sometimes makes of the Old Testament. We know so little of some of the mistaken views against which he is contending that we cannot altogether follow his arguments about them. But when all that is said, it remains true that we can never fully measure the debt that the whole Christian Church owes to the inspired genius of the Apostle.

Paul's outstanding importance in the history of Christianity is just this. That his was the first great mind to be applied to the thinking out of what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus meant to mankind. Jesus Himself could not fully teach all that, because men could not take it in until after they had seen His death and discovered His resurrection.

He said to His disciples that they would learn many things through the guidance of the Spirit, after He was gone from them. No small part of that promised guidance of the Spirit came to the Church through the disciplined mind of Paul. For the task of being the intellectual pioneer of the Church, Paul had three main qualifications.

The first of these was undoubtedly his own personal character. However difficult we may sometimes find Paul's thinking, no one can read his letters without finding in them a wonderfully attractive personality. Probably it would be fair to say that no man in history has ever been more completely devoted to Christ and His cause. No man has ever had a better right to dare to say of himself, " To me to live is Christ " (Phil. i. 21). There is no writer in the Bible of whose personal life we know so much, and all that we do know goes to justify that amazing claim. Paul learned of the secrets of Christ by being willing to follow Him to the uttermost. If his letters taught us nothing else, they would still be of the greatest value, because of the picture they give us of the relation of the Christian to his Lord and Master.

Paul's second qualification for his task was a really great mind. Scholars and thinkers

of all sorts have paid tribute to the masterly ability of the Apostle. It is doubtful if there has ever been a greater mind devoted to the thinking out of the meaning of Christ for all the world. Intellectually Paul had a gigantic task. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus were very recent when he lived. We are the heirs of two thousand years of thinking about these things. Paul was the first man of outstanding ability to try to think out their significance.

His third qualification for this task was of very great importance. His theology always kept close to the needs of actual life. One could wish that all later theologians had followed his example. His letters were mainly called forth by the actual needs of the men and women in his Churches. It is with these men and women in his mind that he thinks out the central truths of the faith. He writes profound theology with a view to influencing daily life. One of his great declarations about how the Lord Jesus Christ left His heavenly home and came down among men is written in order to encourage the Corinthians in Christian liberality (2 Cor. viii. 9). Another passage on the same theme is written in order to persuade the Philippians to think of the claims of others more than of their own rights

(Phil. ii. 5–11). His theology is worked out in close contact with life. It is this that gives it its abiding value.

It is important to bear this in mind. It is not infrequently said to-day that Paul perverted the simplicity of the teaching of Jesus by writing deep and abstruse theology about it. We are told that theology is a thing that may be interesting to a strange race of people called theologians, but that it is really something rather remote from life, and entirely unnecessary for the simple Christian. It is often suggested that Paul gave an unfortunate theological turn to the plain and simple teaching of the Master.

It is not easy to be patient with this kind of talk. "Theology" is simply a Greek word for "thinking about God," and there is a great deal of that in the teaching of Jesus. But when modern people accuse Paul of perverting the Gospel simplicities by turning them into abstruse theology, they are using the word with a rather different meaning. And what they say is simply not true. In the sense in which they use the word, one might well say that Paul hardly wrote a single line of "mere theology." His thinking was never remote from actual life and its daily needs. There are books written in our day, and there

have been books written in almost every age of the Church, about which this might be a reasonable enough criticism. But those who say this kind of thing about Paul have hardly begun to understand his Epistles. Paul surely thinks mainly in order that his thinking may help daily life.

The same thing is true of another great mind of the early Church, the author of the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John. In a later chapter we shall consider the identity of this writer, and the circumstances in which he wrote. 1 John is an Epistle which has been a little neglected by Christian thinkers in the past, but it is now coming to its own. It is full of the very deepest thinking about the love of God and its meaning for daily life. And its author writes, also, in order to influence not so much men's thinking as men's conduct. One of his leading arguments might well be summed up in the saying, "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John iv. 11).

One more question remains to be considered. Granted that these Epistles contain much valuable thinking about the central things of our Christian faith, are we to consider that everything in them is necessarily binding upon us for all time? No one would ever have

thought of asking this question had it not been for the unhappy idea which has so long dominated the Church that the whole Bible is all and equally the authoritative word of God for the guidance of Christian people. Surely Paul would have agreed that we are not necessarily bound to agree with all the opinions expressed by him. He was writing for his own time and his own circumstances, and not with any idea of binding for ever all the Christian people who should come after him. Christian people are bound to Christ and to no one else. To take just one example; if our Christian conscience leads us to feel that Paul's teaching about the position of women in the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. xi. 2–16) is not wholly consistent with what we understand of the mind of the Master, if indeed we feel that it is hardly consistent with his own declaration that in Christ "there can be no male and female" (Gal. iii. 28), then surely we need not hesitate to say so. It is hardly to be imagined that so daring a thinker would expect his words to prevent us from thinking for ourselves about the meaning of the life and words of Jesus.

It will help us to realise this if we bear in mind that none of the writers of our New

Testament had any idea that he was writing a part of the Christian Bible. It was not until something between one and two hundred years after most of our writers had died that their little books came to be regarded as part of the Bible. They wrote because they felt that something needed saying in the particular circumstances in which they were. Generations afterwards men had grown to love their writings, and in the fourth century they were included in the Bible of the Christian Church. Men did not begin to read and to love them because they were in the Bible. They became part of the Bible because they were so read and so loved. They are not inspired in order that their every word may be for ever binding upon us. They are inspired in order that they may call us to greater and nobler living. We know that they are inspired because they do so call us. For that they are for ever valuable.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST THREE GOSPELS

THE most convenient way to study the Gospels and the various questions connected with them is to group the first three together in one lecture, and to leave the fourth to be considered by itself. The first three Gospels have so many close resemblances to one another that all modern books on the subject take them together as forming one group. Roughly speaking, they give us the same kind of outline of the life of Jesus, and for that reason they are commonly called "The Synoptic Gospels." Who wrote them? and how did the writers set about their work? Are they three independent accounts of Jesus, or are they in any way connected with, and dependent on, one another? These questions make up what is generally called "The Synoptic Problem."

The first of these questions might seem unnecessary. Why not be satisfied to accept the names that stand at the head of the Gospels, and say that they were written by

Matthew, Mark, and Luke? But these titles are not really part of the original books at all. The books as they stand are anonymous. None of them mentions the name of its author in any part of its original text. Anonymous writing was far commoner in old times than it is to-day. The titles at the heads of our three Gospels are late additions. They were added to express what was the common view of the early Church as to the authorship of the books. They are what we call traditional titles. In the early days of the Church, when the New Testament was put together, there was a tradition that these men had written these books. This tradition may be right or it may be wrong. That is what scholarship has to try to find out. But we must not consider ourselves bound by it.

The second question, the question of how these three books are related to one another, which is the real heart of the Synoptic problem, is by far the most fascinating question in Biblical study. We can easily see how this question arises.

It is really rather remarkable that these three Gospels are so like one another. Out of the innumerable interesting things that Jesus must have said and done during His public life, why should three different writers

select much the same set of incidents to report to us? There were twelve disciples called to be apostles. All three Gospels tell us about the calling of Peter and Matthew, while none of the three reports the calling of Philip or of Judas. All three tell us of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, which is not really very important, while only two give us any details of the Temptation of Jesus, which is clearly much more important. All three Gospels tell us the Parable of the Sower, while only one tells us the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is much more precious. It seems rather curious. We shall come back to this later.

All three Gospels give us a report of certain sayings and doings of Jesus. Now it is well known that no two people ever describe the same incident in just the same way. We have often seen how two different people will give two entirely different accounts of the same incident, even when they have both been eyewitnesses. Even trained reporters do this. Therefore, if two witnesses in a law court describe the same event in very much the same language, we shall probably begin to suspect that they have laid their heads together beforehand in order to make sure that their stories agree. If two newspapers describe the

same incident in very much the same language, we shall probably suspect that both are employing the same correspondent, or drawing upon the same news agency. In ordinary everyday life we are sure that no two independent people can describe the same thing in just the same way.

Bear this in mind and look back to our three Gospels. Very often we find the same incident described in all three. If we compare the accounts carefully, we shall sometimes find that the language is almost word for word the same. This resemblance does not occur only in reports of the words of Jesus, where it might be natural enough. It extends to the descriptions of events. Take one very small example of this close resemblance of language, and that by no means the most striking. All our three Gospels give an account of the call of Matthew, whose other name was Levi. Look at these three accounts side by side.

Matt. ix. 9.—"And as Jesus passed by from thence, he saw a man, called Matthew sitting at the place of toll; and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him."

Mark ii. 14.—"And as he passed by, he saw

> Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the place of toll, and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed Him."
>
> Luke v. 27.—" And after these things he went forth, and beheld a publican, named Levi, sitting at the place of toll, and he said unto him, Follow me. And he forsook all, and rose up and followed him."

These three accounts are not absolutely identical. We need not wonder that the man is given two names. But apart from this, we cannot help seeing how very similar is the wording of all three accounts. Note the words " sitting at the place of toll " which occur in all three accounts. The fact that Matthew was called while actually engaged in his business as a publican might have been expressed in many different words. Note also the repetition of the curious turn of expression " rose and followed." There are many different ways in which three different writers might have described this incident, yet here we have all three using very much the same language. Surely it is quite clear that we are not dealing with three independent accounts of this incident.

Any careful reader of the Gospels who will

compare the different accounts of the same incidents will notice this sort of resemblance over and over again. Take as a longer example the three reports of the healing of the Paralytic in Capernaum (Matt. ix. 1–8; Mark ii. 1–12; Luke v. 17–26). Many other such instances might be given. After we have studied a few of them, it becomes almost impossible to resist the conviction that we are dealing with three accounts of the ministry of Jesus, which are not entirely independent.

Further, if we look at the different incidents reported by the different writers, we shall find that practically every incident in the Gospel of Mark is reported in one or other or both of the other Gospels. Roughly we may say, that if Mark's Gospel had been entirely lost we should still have known something about every incident which he describes, with one or two unimportant exceptions.

What does all this mean? A very close and detailed examination of the three Gospels has led to the conclusion, which may now be regarded as certain, that both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke were written by men who had the Gospel of Mark before them as they wrote. Of our three Gospels the one to be written first was that of Mark. The other two Synoptic writers made altera-

tions of great interest here and there in what they borrowed from Mark, but there is no reason to doubt that they did borrow, and borrow largely, from him.

Again, Matthew and Luke are both much longer than Mark. Matthew is about half as long again as Mark, and Luke just a shade longer than Matthew. Speaking quite roughly, about half of what we read in Matthew, and half of what we read in Luke, came from Mark. What about the other half in each case? If we take those parts of Matthew which are not borrowed from Mark, and compare them with those parts of Luke which are not borrowed from Mark, we shall find that we are on the same kind of ground again. There is a great deal of matter common to both Matthew and Luke, of which there is no trace in Mark, and once again the two Gospels describe the same events in very much the same language. Take as an example the story of the Temptation in the Wilderness (Matt. iv. 1–11; Luke iv. 1–13). Without going into any further detail about this, it seems only reasonable to infer that both Matthew and Luke had another book before them when they wrote, and that other book was quite different from the Gospel of Mark. This inference is now very generally accepted

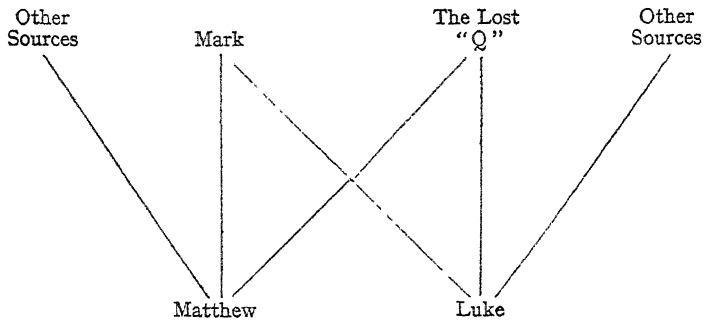
among scholars. This other book is now lost. We can only make a sort of guess at its contents by comparing the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and seeing those points where they are clearly drawing on a common source, but not on Mark. Beyond that we know very little about this lost book. Some writers call it "Q," from the German word "Quelle," meaning source. Others call it "The Discourses" or "The Sayings." Any one of these names will do as well as any other.

If we go over the Gospels and make a list of those incidents which Matthew and Luke describe in much the same sort of way, and which they did not copy from Mark, we shall see that this lost book, "Q," must have contained a number of very important things, such as, for example, the following:—The Preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. iii. 7–12; Luke iii. 7–14), the Story of the Temptation (Matt. iv. 1–11; Luke iv. 1–13), the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew xviii. 12–14; Luke xv. 3–7), the Lament of Jesus over Jerusalem (Matthew xxiii. 37–39; Luke xiii. 34–35), and a number of other things, including the bulk of what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew v.–vii., and many different passages in Luke). The general impression

that we get of this lost book is that it was largely made up of the teaching of Jesus, and that it did not tell us very much about His doings.

We have now seen that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have drawn about half of their material from Mark, and a good deal more of it, about a quarter in each case, from this lost source, "Q." What of the remaining quarter of each of the Gospels? Comparing them with one another we see at once that they are very different. Luke's account of the birth and infancy of Jesus is very different from Matthew's. Evidently they are independent and separate accounts. That is true also of the stories of the Resurrection. Further, as we go through these Gospels we find that each of them tells us some things about Jesus which the other does not mention. Luke is the only one who gives us the Prodigal Son (xv. 11–32), and the Good Samaritan (x. 30–37). Matthew alone gives us the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (xx. 1–16), and the Parable of the Last Judgment (xxv. 31–46). Obviously then, Matthew and Luke each had some independent and separate sources of information.

We can now express the relations between the Gospels in the form of a diagram.



One or two interesting small points in connection with the relation of these three Gospels to one another will come up as we turn to consideration of the questions of authorship and date. In the first few years after Jesus was crucified apparently no one thought of writing any account of His life and teaching. As long as there were many people alive who had known Jesus in the flesh the Church did not want a written record. Perhaps this was partly due to the belief of many Christians that the end of the world was coming soon, and that the Saviour would soon return, so that a written record of His life would be unnecessary. People who wanted to know what had happened on this or that occasion could always ask the surviving friends of Jesus. And one can well imagine how eagerly new converts to the faith would listen

to those who had actually known the Lord as they told well remembered stories of what He had said and done. After a few years, however, the Second Coming of the Lord seemed to be delayed, and the number of survivors of those great days in Galilee and Jerusalem was growing less, and people began to write things down. Little skeleton Gospels, little accounts of different incidents in the life of Jesus, little records of what He had said and taught, began to appear. These are now lost, but there is good reason to believe that at one time they existed. (See Luke i. 1.)

Somewhere about thirty or forty years after Jesus died, when the number of those who had actually known Him was growing painfully small, there was a real need for some fuller and more careful account of His sayings and doings, probably for the instruction of converts. About this time someone made a short collection of the teachings of Jesus, and added a few notes about the facts of His life. This booklet is the lost source which we call "Q." I am inclined to think that it was written by Matthew the Apostle, but we can best discuss that when we come to consider the first Gospel.

About the same time the Gospel which stands second in our New Testament was written.

No one can say with any certainty whether it was written shortly before or shortly after the lost book of Teachings. Probably they both appeared somewhere about 60 or 70 A.D., or perhaps even a little earlier. Its story is interesting. The little Church of Christ had grown, and was spreading over many parts of the world. Peter had gone to Rome to preach and teach there. With him Peter took a man a little younger than himself, to act as a sort of secretary. This was John Mark of Jerusalem, who had once been a companion of Paul on his travels. Probably Peter had got to know him in Jerusalem, as the Apostles at one time used to frequent his mother's house there. In order that the Church at Rome might have some account of Jesus, Mark undertook to write a book for them. He wrote a Gospel from notes of Peter's preaching. Times without number he had heard Peter preach about Jesus, and of course he had often talked with Peter about the Lord. So that Mark's Gospel really gives us the kind of stories that Peter used to tell about his beloved Master. It is called the Gospel according to St Mark. It might almost equally well be called the Reminiscences of St Peter.

Our authority for most of this is in an early Christian commentator who lived in the

first half of the second century. This writer, Papias, took considerable pains to discover all that he could about the different Gospels, and, among other things, he tells us that Mark "became the interpreter of Peter," that he "attended Peter," and that he "wrote down accurately everything that he remembered." It is by no means necessary to accept everything that early Christian writers tell us about the Gospels, but almost all modern scholars are disposed to accept this as a true account of the origin of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark produced an extremely vivid and realistic book, which we may well accept as a real account of Jesus, almost direct from the lips of one of our Lord's closest friends. It has often been noticed that Mark's Gospel is largely made up of incidents, and that it does not give us nearly as much of the teaching of Jesus as the others do. Probably it is natural that Peter would not remember long discourses of Jesus, but would remember many of the strange and wonderful things that he had seen Jesus do, and would recall a number of the striking things that Jesus had said.

We can trace the recollections of Peter in many places. No other Gospel has so many

of the little details of description which can only come from an eyewitness, and which help us to see how Jesus looked and how He felt at different times. This Gospel makes little mistakes on little points which are afterwards corrected by the later writers. Mark introduces a quotation from Malachi by saying that it comes from Isaiah (Mark i. 2). He speaks of David eating the sacred bread in the Temple of Jerusalem at the time when Abiathar was High Priest, although the Book of Samuel tells us that Abiathar's son, Ahimelech, was High Priest when that incident occurred (Mark ii. 26; 1 Sam. xxi. 1–6; 2 Sam. viii. 17). Both Matthew and Luke set these little inaccuracies right when they deal with the incident. We can well imagine Peter making slips like these in his teaching.

We can also see the hand of Peter in the great frankness with which Mark speaks of the twelve Apostles. He tells us much more than the other Synoptic writers of the faults and failings of the twelve, how slow they were to understand, how often Jesus had to rebuke them, how frequently they said rather foolish things. Peter himself had said a good many foolish things, and would naturally remember them.

Altogether, it is generally agreed now that Mark's Gospel is a book of first rate historical

value. Its vivid, picturesque descriptions would make it almost clear that it came from an eyewitness even if we knew nothing of how it was written. It takes us right back to the recollections of one who knew Jesus well, and who would never be tired of talking of what he had seen Jesus do and heard Him say.

A few years after the publication of Mark there appeared that Gospel which is associated with the name of Matthew. It is generally agreed that this Gospel cannot have been written by Matthew the Apostle. It would certainly be very difficult to imagine one who had himself been an eyewitness of many of the doings of Jesus following so closely the writing of Mark if he wanted to write a Gospel. In addition to that, we have a little light from Papias again. Papias tells us that Matthew wrote the Sayings in the Hebrew language, and we may say with confidence that our present Gospel according to St Matthew is not a translation from a Hebrew book. It is just here that we may perhaps get a suggestion as to the authorship of the lost book which we call "Q." It is impossible to be at all certain, but it may well be that this "Q" is the book to which Papias refers. In that case it would be easy to see why Matthew's name became associated with a Gospel which makes such a

large use of the book that he did write. Unless we can believe that Matthew wrote this lost book, " Q," then it is difficult to account at all for the tradition that put his name at the head of the first Gospel. This, however, must be regarded as to some extent guesswork, and very uncertain.

The author of our first Gospel set out to write an account of Jesus for Jewish readers. It was clearly written by a man who was soaked in the spirit and language of the Old Testament, and who wanted to make his Jewish readers see that Jesus was the fulfilment of all that the Old Testament was leading up to. Everyone has noticed how often this Gospel gives a little quotation from the Old Testament which seems to illustrate what we are being told. Very often the illustration is not one that would commend itself to our modern minds, but the readers of this Gospel in the first century would not see anything strange in it. When our author is telling how the infant Jesus was brought home from Egypt by His parents, he puts in a quotation from Hosea (xi. 1), " Out of Egypt did I call my son (Matt. ii. 15). Similarly when he describes Jesus healing the sick, he is reminded of the words from Isaiah (liii. 4), " Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows " (Matt. viii. 17). The

quotation in our Bibles is not verbally exact, but it is near enough to be quite obvious. And so on, right through the book.

This Jewish writer had, as we have seen, two books before him when he wrote. One was the Gospel of Mark, and the other was the book of Sayings (Q). Also he had access to other sources of information which we cannot now trace, from which he gives us stories about Jesus that appear in no other Gospel. He did not write his account of Jesus in any strict chronological order. He seems to have grouped his materials, to some degree, according to their subject. Chapters v., vi., and vii. contain a great deal of the teaching of Jesus, which was probably given, as Luke's Gospel suggests, at different times in Jesus' ministry. Then chapters viii. and ix. contain a number of what we may call specimen miracles of Jesus. Chapter xiii. collects together a group of parables, and chapter xxiii. a group of sayings about the Pharisees.

When he was copying from Mark our writer sometimes made little changes. Some of these have no particular purpose that we can discover, but others are rather interesting. It looks as if he had sometimes felt that his readers might misunderstand the rather frank outspokenness of Mark. Mark tells us that when

Jesus was teaching in Nazareth the people asked, " Is not this the carpenter ? " (vi. 3). The reverent Christian who wrote our first Gospel seems to have thought that it was hardly fitting to describe Jesus Christ the Lord as a carpenter. He changed the question of the people into the less blunt, " Is not this the carpenter's son ? " (xiii. 55). In the same passage Mark tells us that because of the unbelief of Nazareth Jesus could not there do any great works (vi. 5). Our writer hardly likes to suggest that there is anything that Jesus cannot do, so he changes the statement into one that Jesus did not do any great works there (xiii. 58). There are other instances of this sort throughout the book.

It does not greatly matter who wrote this book. Whoever he was, we may take it that he wrote a book of very great historical value. He based the greater part of his narrative upon two older sources. He has added some material of great interest and importance which he did not get from Mark, and which he probably did not get from " Q," such as the Parable of the Ten Virgins (xxv. 1–13), and the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (xviii. 21–35). He has given us a valuable record of the teaching of Jesus. A Jew, writing for Jews, he has been at special pains to

describe the attitude of Jesus to the ancient Law associated with the name of Moses (v. 21–48), and he has also taken care to point out the opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees (xxiii.). This Gospel may be dated somewhere about 70 or 80 A.D.

Now we come to the third Gospel, which Renan called the most beautiful book in the world. This also appeared, probably, about forty years after the death of Jesus. There is now really no doubt that this Gospel is from the same hand as wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and it may be taken as very nearly certain that both the Gospel and the Acts were written by Luke, the doctor who was Paul's travelling companion on some of his journeys. In recent years, as scholars have been discovering more about the state of the Roman Empire in the days of Paul, it has become clear that Luke was a painstaking and exact historian. The laborious researches of Sir W. M. Ramsay have done much to establish this. Luke was an educated man and wrote a good literary style. In the passages which he borrows from Mark he makes many little improvements in the rougher style of the earlier book. He tells us (i. 1–4) that he wrote for the information of his friend Theophilus, as well as for a wider circle of readers, and that he consulted

many sources and tried to write as accurately as possible. Few scholars now doubt that this is a just and reasonable claim. He tells us in the verses referred to that when he came to write there were in existence many different accounts of the sayings and doings of Jesus. He implies that he has consulted these. We have already seen that two of them were Mark and "Q." Apart from these he had many sources of information. Some of them, we gather, were written sources, but others would probably be personal reminiscences of people who had actually known the Lord. While he was travelling with Paul he must have met many people who had known Jesus in the flesh, and we can well imagine that he would ask them to tell him about the Master.

Like the author of our first Gospel, Luke also makes interesting little changes in what he takes from Mark. He omits the saying that Jesus could do no mighty works in Nazareth, and instead of the question, "Is not this the carpenter?" Luke has "Is not this Joseph's son?" Like the writer of Matthew, he will not say that Jesus was surprised by the lack of faith in Nazareth. Loyal soul that he is, he will admit nothing into his story that might lead people to under-

estimate the greatness of his Lord. He has also introduced some changes in Mark's way of speaking about the twelve Apostles. To Luke these men were leaders and pillars of the Church, men of authority and importance. He had never known them in the days when they were learning at the feet of Jesus, and he could not quite bring himself to write of them as the rather blundering people whom Mark describes. He will not join with Mark in saying that they were afraid as they went up with Jesus to Jerusalem. (Mark x. 32. The parallel chapter in Luke is xviii., but there is nothing corresponding to this verse.) All through his Gospel he deals very gently with the failings of the twelve.

From the special material that Luke has gathered together we can see something of what were his own particular interests. Writing for Gentiles, he naturally left out a good deal of what the first Gospel tells us about the relation of Jesus to the Old Testament. He took a particular delight in telling of those incidents that shewed the interest of Jesus in the Gentiles. Writing in an age when women were generally rather looked down on, he was careful to tell of the numbers of women who were kindly to Jesus. He was at pains to collect the sayings of Jesus about the dangers

of wealth, and he delighted to tell of the prayers of our Lord.

Luke's Gospel must take its place among the others as a book of real historical value. He writes as a man accustomed to weigh evidence, and he is careful to try to give us good history. Anyone who travelled with Paul might well have special opportunities of hearing stories about Jesus, and Luke has added much to our knowledge of the Lord. Many of the most beautiful things in all the story of Jesus would have been lost to us had it not been for Luke.

I have laid some stress on the fact that each of the three Synoptic Gospels may be looked on as real and valuable history. I have done that for one very important reason. When we dealt with Old Testament history, we saw that much of it was written many hundreds of years after the events described took place. It is quite clear that the Synoptic Gospels are history of a very different kind. They were written while men were still living who had actually known the Lord. They were written by people who were in touch with those who really knew the facts of His life.

This of course does not mean that every single word in all three Gospels is to be taken as literally and exactly true, or that every utterance of Jesus was reported with perfect accuracy.

We have already seen that there are differences here and there between our three Gospels. In many cases there is still room for some doubt as to what actually happened, and as to what exactly Jesus said. But this does nothing to discredit the central picture given by all three Gospels. That picture still stands. It is the real, historical Jesus of Nazareth Whom we meet in the pages of the Synoptic Gospels.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST JOHN

BEFORE we begin to consider the problems and perplexities connected with the Fourth Gospel, it is well to remember one thing. Many of the saintliest and most experienced of humble Christian people find that this Gospel is their favourite. This is the one they really love best, the one to which they most readily turn for the deepest things. How often in times of trial and crisis Christian people turn naturally to the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of this Gospel. How often the words about the many mansions in the Father's House (xiv. 2), and the words about the Resurrection and the Life (xi. 25), have comforted the dying and the mourning. How real to the deepest Christian experience is the allegory about the Vine and the branches (xv. 1–8). No brief statement of our common faith has so commended itself to generations of Christian people as that which tells us that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on

him should not perish, but have eternal life" iii. 16). This of itself proves very little, but it is important that we should keep it in mind. This is the right point at which to start our consideration of the Fourth Gospel.

Yet this is one of the things that makes it difficult to discuss the Gospel frankly. So much that is of real value seems to be at stake. To many simple Christian people who have found "the words of eternal life" in this Gospel, it must come as a shock to learn that one of the most widely discussed questions of New Testament scholarship in the last hundred years has been, Is the Fourth Gospel true? Is it a trustworthy record of the sayings and doings of Jesus? Is it a reliable account of what Jesus was? Yet such is the fact. A great deal of recent discussion of the Fourth Gospel has raged round the question of its historical truth.

It is only honest to say at the very outset that the question is a very difficult one. Most of what I have said in the earlier lectures might quite reasonably be called "assured results of modern scholarship." But when we come to the Fourth Gospel, the truth is that there is almost nothing which we can yet call an assured result. The questions concerning the Fourth Gospel, indeed the questions concerning

all the books called by the name of John in our New Testament, are still unsettled. They are, at the present day, the most difficult questions in New Testament study. And we have to face the possibility that perhaps they may never be settled.

Look for a little at the questions that are being discussed. Why is it that scholars are wondering whether this Gospel is a true account of Jesus? Why is it that many have argued that it could never have been written by an eyewitness of the life and doings of Jesus, an actual hearer of His words? Broadly speaking the answer to these questions is that the Fourth Gospel appears to be very different from the other three. I have already said that the first three Gospels may be fairly accepted as really good history, as giving a true picture of the life and teaching of Jesus. But when we come to read the Fourth Gospel we cannot help feeling that the story is a little different. The main differences may be grouped under two heads.

I. *Where did Jesus spend most of His public ministry?*

The first three Gospels describe His public life as largely lived in Galilee. Jerusalem hardly comes into the story at all, until near

the end. The Synoptic Gospels tell us of only one visit to Jerusalem after the Baptism, and that was when He went up at the end, to die. The story in the Fourth Gospel is quite different. There we are told of several visits to Jerusalem. Little is said about the ministry in Galilee. Read the Fourth Gospel hurriedly, and you will gather the impression that Jesus was a great deal in Jerusalem, and only visited Galilee occasionally.

II. *What kind of things did Jesus talk about?*

His teaching as given in John is rather different from His teaching as given in the Synoptics. One way of putting the difference is to say that in the Synoptics Jesus talks a great deal about the duties of life, being kindly, being pure in heart, forgiving those who injure you, trusting in God without undue anxiety, being watchful of the dangers of wealth, and so on. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus talks, as it were, more theologically, about Who He is, and what is His relation to God, about abiding in Him and believing in Him, and the like. This is clear to every reader. Another way of putting the difference is to say that the main subject of the teaching in the Synoptics is the Kingdom of God, while in John it is Eternal Life. In the first three Gospels,

also, Jesus says very little about Who He is, except in talking to the disciples. In the Fourth, He seems to discuss Himself with all sorts of people.

These are the broad general differences. There are also minor differences of detail which need not detain us. These broad general differences are striking enough. They have been very widely discussed, and no one will wish to make light of them. Because of these, many careful students have said that the Fourth Gospel could not possibly be a true account of Jesus. They came therefore to the conclusion that the Gospel could not have been written by anyone who actually knew Jesus and was present with Him when He went about teaching. And so, of course, they argued that it could not possibly have been written by John the son of Zebedee. What was often said was something like this. "Either the picture given by the Synoptists is true, or the picture given by John is true. They cannot possibly both be true." And having said that, they rejected the Fourth Gospel. This of course does not mean that they denied that it had any real value. They regarded it as a spiritual interpretation of the life of Jesus, but they felt that its value was not historical.

It is worth while examining this carefully. I am convinced that the differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel have often been exaggerated. The differences are real but they are not so great as has sometimes been thought, and such differences as there are do not necessarily prove that the Fourth Gospel is unhistorical. Look again at the two points that we have already raised.

I. *The place of the ministry of Jesus.*

The Synoptic Gospels do not tell us that Jesus ever visited Jerusalem after His Baptism, until the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. But it is clear that these three Gospels do not tell us everything that Jesus did. They do not say anything that definitely excludes an earlier visit to the City. In one very important place they do quite definitely suggest that He must have gone there more than once before the last visit. In Matthew (xxiii. 37) we are told that Jesus, after He had come into Jerusalem, addressed the City in these words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" The same words are given by Luke (xiii. 34)

in a different connection. Surely they make it quite plain to us that Jesus had paid more than one previous visit to the capital. "How often would I . . . but ye would not." Jesus could hardly have spoken like that unless He had made at least one, and probably more than one, previous attempt to win Jerusalem.

So we are at once brought up to the suggestion that Jesus carried on two different ministries, so to put it. One was in Galilee, of which the Fourth Gospel tells us very little. The other was in Jerusalem, and of it the Synoptics say very little. On this point, then, it may fairly be said that the first three Gospels do not prove that John is unhistorical. They actually hint at just such a Jerusalem ministry as John describes.

II. *The subject of the teaching.*

Clearly the Fourth Gospel gives us a different idea of the teaching of Jesus from what we get in the Synoptic Gospels. I cannot resist the impression that on this point the difference, though very real, is not so great as is sometimes said. It is not only in the Fourth Gospel that we are told of Jesus being concerned that men should know Who He is. One of the really critical points in the Synoptic story is the incident at Cæsarea Philippi (Matt. xvi. 13–20;

Mark viii. 27–30; Luke ix. 18–21). Here the great question, about which Jesus is obviously deeply concerned, is " Who say ye that I am ? " Later in the Synoptic story we find Jesus discussing with the scribes and Pharisees the question of the Christ being the son of David (Matt. xxii. 41–46; Mark xii. 35–37; Luke xx. 41–44). This incident is rather illuminating, because it took place in Jerusalem. Perhaps the difference between the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics and the teaching of Jesus in John is partly due to the difference between Jerusalem and Galilee.

This is a point to be remembered. In Galilee Jesus spoke to the common people. In Jerusalem He more often addressed religious experts, the leaders of the Church. Is it not natural that His teaching should be rather different in the different places ? Imagine a great preacher of our time speaking one day at an open air meeting in the Park, and the next day before the University of Oxford. Probably there will be a good deal of difference between the two sermons. It may well be that some of the difference that we have marked between the two presentations of Jesus' teaching are due to the difference in the hearers. One would hardly expect Jesus to say the same things in Galilee and in

Jerusalem. To this extent the differences that we notice may be a mark of the truthfulness of both accounts.

I do not suggest at all that this is a complete explanation of the differences between John and the Synoptics. It is not. There are differences left that these explanations do not cover. But I do want to say that these differences must not be exaggerated. The considerations that we have looked at help us to reduce the differences to their proper proportions. I am convinced that when they are remembered, there is nothing in what we have examined that makes it impossible to believe in the essential historical truth of the picture given us in the Fourth Gospel. One or two minor differences of detail leave us with the impression that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was deliberately trying to correct the impression made by the other three, and was doing that from real first-hand knowledge.

An interesting example of the way in which the Fourth Gospel supplements the other three is found in the case of the call of the first disciples. We read in the Synoptics of how Jesus called the first four disciples quite suddenly from their fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Matt. iv. 18–22; Mark i. 16–20; Luke v. 1–11). There is no account of Jesus ever

having met them before. He comes to them one day, and calls on them to leave their fishing and follow Him. And at once they follow. We cannot help feeling that there is something left to be explained. It is difficult to believe that the four fishermen would give up their only means of livelihood on the bare word of a complete stranger in that way. Surely here John's Gospel comes in to give us that further information which makes the story credible. According to the Fourth Gospel (i. 35–51) these four men had already met Jesus. They were all disciples of John the Baptist at the time when Jesus came to him for baptism, and John had called their attention to Jesus, Whom they had then come to know. Peter, in a speech given in the Acts (i. 21–22), suggests that he had followed Jesus " beginning from the baptism of John." The story in the first chapter of John is just what is needed to explain the story in the Synoptics, and to bring it into line with Peter's speech.

Now, if these considerations lead us to the belief that the Fourth Gospel cannot be set aside as entirely unhistorical, we may go on to see what the writer of the Gospel claims for himself. There is an interesting note in John's story of the Crucifixion (xix. 35). In

telling of how one of the soldiers pierced the side of the crucified Jesus, our writer inserts this comment. " He that hath seen hath borne witness, and his witness is true: and he knoweth that he saith true." This is surely a claim that the story is told by one who was there when it happened, and saw for himself. Again, we may take it for granted (for many reasons into which I cannot go here) that the First Epistle of John was written by the same hand as wrote the Gospel. It was quite probably circulated with the Gospel, as a kind of Introduction. This Epistle claims to have been written by one who actually saw and heard Jesus. That seems the obvious meaning of the words, " That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also " (1 John i. 3. See also verses 1 and 2). The Gospel and Epistle, then, claim to have been written by someone who was an eyewitness of at least part of the life of our Lord.

When we read the Gospels with this in our minds, we cannot help seeing a good many signs that seem to bear it out. This is perhaps a point which it is rather difficult for any man to make clear to others. The same things make different impressions on different people. Some will be ready to see the marks of an eyewitness where others see nothing

like that. To me, the authentic mark of the eyewitness is all over many places in this Gospel. If this is so, then it is very significant. Taken along with the verses quoted, it means a good deal. It is difficult to doubt that the Fourth Gospel was written by someone who actually saw and heard much of what he describes, or, at any rate, was written by someone who was intimately acquainted with the teaching of an eyewitness.

The next point is interesting. It is the view of many careful scholars that the last chapter of this Gospel is a later addition. Look at the closing verses of chapter xx. "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." Once it is pointed out to us, it is difficult not to feel that this was meant to be the close of the book. These are fitting words for rounding off an account of the life and death and rising of Jesus. There are other reasons for believing that chapter twenty-one is an appendix, but these words confirm that view.

For our purpose, the interesting words of this disputed chapter are in verse 24. "This

is the disciple which beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true." The disciple about whom this comment is made is called in the chapter "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The verse I have quoted looks as though it had not been written by the man who wrote the main bulk of the Gospel. It is someone else telling us that the Gospel was written by the disciple whom Jesus loved, and telling us that what the disciple-author wrote is true. It looks as if this verse was written by a man who wanted to bear his witness to the truth of the rest of the Gospel, and who tells us, incidentally, that the writer of the Gospel was the disciple whom Jesus loved.

I want to admit quite frankly that nothing of this is absolute proof. There is nothing here about which one dare be dogmatic. But, to me, it all points to a considerable probability that the Gospel was written by the one who is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Any single one of the points mentioned above might well be disputed. But taken altogether they make a case which is not easily resisted. Leave aside for the moment any question about the identity of the disciple whom Jesus loved. Whoever he was, he was clearly one who knew at first-hand many of the events of which he

wrote. He knew the Person about Whom he wrote. He saw many of the things that Jesus did and he heard much of what Jesus said.

Turn back to the consideration from which we started. With many real saints this Gospel is the favourite of the four. Our knowledge of Jesus would be much less if we had to leave it out of account. It contains much that, for deep religious reasons, we love and value. Now, is it likely that someone who never knew Jesus would be able to give us an imaginative picture of the Master which would make that kind of impression on us? This kind of consideration has to be handled with care. Scholars are apt to be a little suspicious of it. It is dangerous unless it is used very carefully. And yet, it is valid. If these words which we so dearly love did not come in the first place from Jesus, then who was the spiritual genius who was able to invent them? Was there some unknown man in the early part of the second century, who was able to imagine for us a spiritual picture of Jesus that would strike humble and simple Christians as touching deeper and higher levels than the authentic picture in the first three Gospels? It seems hardly likely.

If what has already been said is in any

way convincing, then it may quite fairly be added that the question of authorship is not very important. What we really want to know about the Fourth Gospel is, Is it a trustworthy picture of Jesus? May we still turn to its deepest passages and believe that we are really in touch with the Master Himself? I believe that on the whole we may. This is not to suggest that every single word in the Gospel is literally and absolutely true. It is not to suggest that the writer never made a mistake, or that he was perfectly informed about everything, or that his memory was never coloured by later reflection. That is a claim we can never make for any Gospel writer. This Gospel was written long after Jesus died, written by a very old man. I have no doubt that his memory was often coloured by his subsequent thought about the wonderful scenes in which he had played a part. I have no doubt that, in the course of a long life, he had so often taught his younger friends about Jesus that in time he came to be a little uncertain, so to speak, as to which was text and which was sermon. His own comments on what he had seen and heard were not very sharply distinguished from his reports. His lifelong thought about the meaning of the Lord's words was probably

mixed up in his own mind with his memory of the words themselves. We need not suppose that the long conversations with Nicodemus and the Woman of Samaria are reported to us in the very words that Jesus used. That would be unnatural. But what we have is a true picture. The writer knew Jesus, and told us of events which he could never forget, and on which he had thought all his days. What he writes is not a shorthand report, but it is a real account of Jesus. As Dr Armitage Robinson puts it, it is "a true picture but not a phonographic record."

The question of the actual authorship of the Gospel is much less important. But of course it cannot be avoided. We have already argued that the writer was the disciple whom Jesus loved. Does that settle the question? We have rather too easily taken it for granted that the beloved disciple must be John the son of Zebedee, but this is by no means certain. We are never directly told in the Gospel that he is. John was a common name in the old days, just as it is now. It is this that makes room for the possibility of a mistake. There is a strong tradition, coming down from very early days, that this Gospel was written by John the son of Zebedee, when he was a very old man, living at Ephesus. There are many

reasons for believing that the Gospel was written at Ephesus, and that it was written fifty or sixty years after Jesus died. If the author was an eyewitness he must have been a very old man when he wrote. But it is just possible that this ancient tradition has confused John the son of Zebedee with another John, who also knew Jesus, although he was not one of the twelve apostles.

This is not simply imagination. There are good historical reasons for believing that there were two men called John who were of considerable importance in the early Church. Papias, whose work we have already quoted (in the last chapter), tells us, in a much discussed passage, of two Johns, both of whom had known the Lord. (It is not absolutely certain that this passage in Papias does refer to two Johns, but undoubtedly the general and obvious sense of his words involves two different people, one of whom was still alive when Papias was making enquiries). One of these is John the Apostle. The other is a man whom he calls John the Elder. Now the fact that there were two Johns, both of whom knew Jesus, is just what makes it possible that there may have been some confusion. There is a very strong tradition that the Gospel was written by someone called

John, but it is possible that the tradition has become confused as between the two Johns.

This gives us two possible authors for the Gospel. There is a good deal to be said in favour of each, and a good deal to be said against each. Look at the two possibilities in turn.

I. The disciple whom Jesus loved is John the son of Zebedee. This is the old view, and may very likely be the true one. In that case, he never mentions himself by name, but always calls himself either "the disciple whom Jesus loved" or more simply, "another disciple." It is clear from the Gospel that he was a close friend of Peter and that he was very intimate with Jesus. This agrees with what we know of John the son of Zebedee from the first three Gospels.

Why not be content with this? It seems a simple and natural view to take. But there are difficulties. It is not easy to see how a Galilean fisherman should have been known to the High Priest and should have had the entry into the High Priest's Court (John xviii. 15). That may not seem very important, but it is a point to be noted. Also, we know that John the son of Zebedee was with Jesus during all the course of His ministry in Galilee. Can we believe that he wrote an account of Jesus and simply left out all that

Galilean ministry which he knew so well? Certainly he wrote after the other Gospels had been published, and he may have felt that the Galilean ministry had been well enough described. Even so, I find it hard to believe that he would not have told us a good deal more about those unforgettable days in Galilee, of which he must so often have spoken to his friends.

II. The second possible view is that the beloved disciple was John the Elder, who also knew Jesus. In that case, we should say that this John was a Jerusalem Jew, who had come to know Jesus during the mission of the Baptist, and who afterwards went very little into Galilee. He wrote of the Jerusalem ministry because that was what he knew. He was a close friend of Jesus. He was present, in addition to the twelve, in the Upper Room at the last Supper. He took charge of the Mother of Jesus after the crucifixion. Whenever Jesus came up to Jerusalem, this John would seek Him out and company with Him. He lived to be a very old man, and some people who knew him in his old age, and who knew how intimate he had been with Jesus, very naturally confused him with John the Apostle.

This view solves some difficulties, but creates others. It means that there was a thirteenth

disciple present at the Last Supper. This is not impossible, but in view of what is said in the Synoptics (Matt. xxvi. 20; Mark xiv. 17; Luke xxii. 14) it seems unlikely. Further, if the beloved disciple is not John the son of Zebedee, then John the son of Zebedee is never mentioned in the Fourth Gospel. Now we can see that the beloved disciple was intimate with Peter as well as with Jesus. And Peter was a close friend of his fellow-apostle, John the son of Zebedee. It is surely hard to believe that an intimate friend of Jesus and of Peter could write a Gospel without mentioning John the Apostle.

These are the main considerations that bear on the identity of the beloved disciple, whom we believe to be the author of the Gospel. It seems quite impossible to decide between them. It may be that we shall never know. This seems unsatisfactory. Yet it is worth repeating that if this Gospel was written by the beloved disciple, then it does not very much matter who he was. What really matters is that the Gospel comes to us from an author who had known Jesus well when He lived on earth. The unsettled question about which John it was is interesting but not vital. There seems to be no theory of authorship which will fit all the facts, and that is what a really

valid theory ought to do. But even if we go no further we can thank God that some one wrote this book. There it stands, with all its perplexities, but also, and much more important, with all its singular beauty and power. Whoever wrote it, it remains perhaps the deepest and most beautiful book in all the world. Whether it was written by a Galilean fisherman, or by a man who was brought up in the religious circle of Jerusalem, I believe that it was written by one who knew Jesus well. It was written after a long life of service and suffering for the Master's sake. The writing is an old man's memories of what Jesus was long ago in Jerusalem. But it is also the outcome of a long life of experience of what Jesus could be to one who truly loved Him. It is not merely the memory of one who once knew Jesus. It is the experience of one who, after fifty years, still knows and loves the inward spiritual presence of the Risen Master, and who is very sure that Jesus is indeed the Life and the Light of men.

We have now come to the end of our study of the four Gospels. We have tried to see something of what modern scholarship has to say about the way in which they were written, and about their historical value. The importance of this study cannot well be

exaggerated. Obviously the Church is built upon Jesus Christ. It is of little consequence whether we have or do not have a true portrait of Abraham or of Joseph. It would matter enormously if we could not trust the picture of Jesus. Very little in our faith depends on how well we know Moses, but a great deal depends on how well we know Jesus. If it is the centre of the Christian faith that God is like Jesus, then clearly it is of the utmost value that we should really know what Jesus was like. For this, I believe that we can trust our Gospels. This is not a matter of verbal exactness and literal accuracy. That, I repeat, we cannot claim for any Gospel. But, after the very careful, and sometimes hostile, scrutiny of the last hundred years, we can fairly claim that the Gospel picture of Jesus stands. The four Gospels do not give us exactly the same account of Jesus. We need them all if we are really to know Him. But with them all in our hands, we can know the truth about Jesus. As Dr Denney used to put it, "We may not have the words of our Lord, but we certainly have the word of the Lord." Through these Gospels we can come into touch with the real Jesus. There are many things about this modern study of the Bible which are a little puzzling

to many good Christian people. But I want to affirm my conviction that there is nothing in the modern view of Scripture which in the least degree takes Jesus from us. It is rather the other way. The main result of the Gospel study of the last hundred years has been, for many people, to make Jesus stand out all the more clearly. More and more, as we study the Gospels, we find in Him the one supreme example, the one perfect Man, the one complete revelation of the Eternal God, the One Who is utterly human and perfectly divine, Son of man and Son of God, Saviour of the world, and Lord of all good life.

To Him be the glory for ever and ever.

NOTES ON BOOKS

The following suggestions as to books may be helpful to those who are willing to read further on the subjects discussed in the foregoing lectures.

Those who have read very little on the modern approach to the Bible would do well to begin with two short but very useful books, one on the Old Testament, and one on the Four Gospels.

The Meaning of the Old Testament, by Hugh Martin (S.C.M.), 3s. 6d. and 2s. 6d., and, *The Study of the Gospels,* by J. Armitage Robinson, D.D. (Longmans), 3s. 6d., a fascinating book, which cannot be too highly commended.

For further and more detailed study of the subject, the following are recommended:

The Bible, its Origin, Significance, and Abiding Worth, by Prof. A. S. Peake, D.D. (Hodder & Stoughton.) 6s. A long book, by an acknowledged master of the subject, covering the whole ground very fully.

Our Bible in the Making, by J. Paterson Smyth, Litt.D. (Sampson, Low, Marston & Co.), 3s. 6d. A readable book, with useful information about the manuscripts of the books of the Bible. (See also the same writer's well-known book, *How we got our Bible.*)

The Divine Library of the Old Testament, by A. F. Kirkpatrick, D.D. (Macmillan.) 2s. Five lectures on the Old Testament.

The Bible, its Origin and Nature, by Dr Marcus Dods (T. & T. Clark), 6s., is an old book now, but still well worth reading, particularly for a chapter on the meaning of Inspiration.

The most useful single book of reference for detailed information about almost every question connected with the study of the Bible, is undoubtedly the *Commentary on the Bible* in one volume, edited by Prof. Peake. (T. C. & E. C. Jack.) 12s. 6d.

Those who are inclined to be afraid lest the modern method of study should destroy the religious value of the Old Testament are referred to the following:

God in the Old Testament, by J. W. Coutts, M.A. (United Free Church of Scotland.) 1s.

The Use of the Old Testament, by Prof. J. E. McFadyen, D.D. (James Clarke & Co.) 6s.

The Growth of the Old Testament, by T. A. Jefferies. (G. G. Harrap & Co.) 3s. 6d.

The two latter books will be found useful by those who are concerned with the teaching of the Old Testament to young people.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

PREPARED BY MR ASHLEY D. TURNER

CHAPTER I

1. " The religious value of the Old Testament to-day depends on an understanding of its religious message to its original audience."

 " The religious message of the Old Testament is for all time and is there for us to read and accept."

 Have these two anything to learn from each other ?

2. The " critic " differs from the " literalist," not so much in his results as in the assumptions on which he pursues his enquiry. " Free approach " (p. 12), " Experience " (pp. 13-14). Are these assumptions justifiable ?

3. " There *are* difficulties in taking the Old Testament literally, but it's lack of faith to doubt its truth." Is it ? or is it facing facts ?

4. " The human side alone is not enough to account for what we have in the Old Testament story " (p. 25). Is this merely a formal concession to the ideas of the past ? If not, what light does the Old Testament throw on *how* God reveals Himself ?

5. Does the summary of the " four main things learned " (pp. 18-26) hit the mark ?

6. " We must be very careful not to allow Old Testament ideas of God to dominate our Christian thinking " (p. 17). Do you find any " Old Testament ideas of God " which seem to you inconsistent with Christianity, in the thinking of Christian people to-day ?

CHAPTER II

1. The writers of this Old Testament history believed in a God who was behind Israel. They found justification for this in their national experience. Which is more important—this faith in a "living God" or the exactness of their historical traditions?

2. "But the writers thought they were being accurate." Are you sure they did? (See p. 41.) Even so, does that really matter?

3. What would you reply to the man who says, "If the Old Testament is wrong on the details of the Flood or David's census, how can I trust it anywhere? What has become of the authority of the Bible?"

4. The writers think of God's action in history as having a direct relation to the moral and religious conditions of His people. In the light of Christ, and of science and increasing knowledge, can we see any truth in this faith to-day?

5. "All this JEDP business is very arid and unprofitable." "Because it throws light on the way in which God became more and more real to the Hebrew people, the analysis of the Pentateuch is an immense gain to religion." Which is right?

CHAPTER III

1. Read these early chapters of Genesis again, trying to see what it was which made them worth telling and preserving.

2. Scientist says, " I cannot accept these stories in Genesis because science proves that they are worthless."

 Literalist says, " I cannot accept the teachings of modern science because they contradict Genesis."

 What do you say ?

3. " They are far more than myths " (p. 53). Even so, are they, on this theory, of any real significance to us to-day ?

4. " It aims at showing men how God comes into everything " (p. 56). " The modern outlook on the world is so different that we can't regard this primitive faith as any help to us." Can't we ?

5. " But after all it is possible that these stories may be historically true." Suppose they were proved true, would it add to their abiding value for us ?

CHAPTER IV

1. " The prophets were preachers, saying things for the people of their own time to hear and understand " (p. 62). Do you agree ? Did they not foretell the future ? If they didn't why should we study them to-day ?

2. " Religious statesmen," " political parsons."

 If these Old Testament prophets were living to-day, can you imagine what they would have to say about our modern social and international questions ?

 Is it fanciful to look for the day when Parliament will discuss what is the mind of

Christ on public matters — housing, international dealings, etc.—and frame legislation on that basis ?

3. " The prophets were inspired preachers . . . speak to His people " (p. 68). Is this your idea of what the prophets were and how they arrived at their prophetic message ? Does this do justice to their claim " Thus saith the Lord " ? (p. 66).

CHAPTER V

1. " It is not meant to be believed. It is meant to be understood " (p. 83). Do you think the author of this chapter understands it ?

2. Are there any modern parallels to the situation outlined on pp. 84-6 ? Think especially of our outlook on

 (*a*) British Empire.
 (*b*) Colour and race questions.
 (*c*) Class distinctions.
 (*d*) The Church.

3. Have you read the Book of Jonah lately ? (This need not be discussed !)

4. " There is no higher teaching than this in the Old Testament " (p. 93). Do you agree ?

CHAPTER VI

1. " But is this, after all, a great loss ? " (p. 103). Discuss, quite frankly, just what value and worth you actually see for yourself in the epistles.

2. " Paul learned of the secrets of Christ by being willing to follow Him to the uttermost " (p. 106). Is there ever any other way of learning ?

3. " I'm not at all sure that I like the concluding paragraph of this chapter. If that is all inspiration means, it robs me of my certainty about its authority." Talk about this.

4. " No small part of that promised guidance of the spirit came to the Church through the disciplined mind of Paul " (p. 106). Go over some of the great teachings of Paul—love, the power and grace of God, life in Christ, etc. etc.—which we should miss if we had not got his missionary correspondence.

CHAPTER VII

1. Why is it of real importance for religion and not a mere intellectual interest for us to examine the Synoptic Problem ?

2. " We can trace the recollections of Peter in many places " (in Mark's Gospel) (p. 124). Try to find some more indications of it.

3. The writers of the first and third Gospels each made alterations in the text of Mark : they each added material which the other had not. Does their way of telling the story give us any hints about their own personal experience of Christ ?

4. " That picture still stands " (p. 134). Is this statement really convincing when we look at the Gospels in the light of what we have learned about their authorship ?

CHAPTER VIII

1. Are the differences between the Fourth Gospel and the others (pp. 137-9) really borne out by the evidence? Is the treatment of these difficulties in this chapter really helpful?

2. If there are more signs in this Gospel of the author's thinking about the meaning of the life of Christ than in the other Gospels, does it make us distrust him?

3. Is there any discrepancy between the character of the Jesus of this Gospel and the Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels?

4. " What really matters is that the Gospel comes to us from an author who had known Jesus well when He lived on earth " (p. 154). Is this really true or does it shelve a vital question?

5. " We need them all if we are really to know Him " (p.156). Can we say what are the peculiar contributions to our knowledge of Jesus which comes to us from each of them?

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